

TEACHERS CREATING SUCCESS STORIES: ALTERNATIVE-EDUCATION
PROGRAMS FOR AT-RISK STUDENTS

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Abstract

Students who become at-risk of not completing school are among the most vulnerable in education systems. The circumstances that place them at-risk are multiple, varied and often beyond their control. For too long, these students have been falling through the cracks of education systems, dropping out and failing in school, because they are perceived through the lens of their inadequacies, their unfortunate situations, and inability to fit into the proverbial mainstream school mould. In this study, constructivist grounded theory was used to: examine the conditions six teachers of three alternative education programs identified as necessary for students at-risk to be successful; what six graduates of two of the three programs interpreted as meaningful and symbolic in the conditions created in their programs; and, ultimately, to generate or support prior theories that underly the conditions identified in these programs.

The research participants' description of their experiences in the three alternative programs, their multiple realities, and the associated subjectivities that emerged in the research process, including those of the researcher, were analysed. Using symbolic interactionism as an epistemological device, this research demonstrated that the teachers' identification of the students' inherent needs through the formation of caring relationships, adjusting academic expectations to meet students where they were, and constructing and maintaining an affective and supportive environment, increased the students' ability to function and achieve success.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

At-Risk Students and Alternative Education Programs

Plutarch's famous quote "The mind is not a vessel to be filled, but a fire to be kindled" describes my view on pedagogy in the first few years of teaching career as a mainstream teacher, and what it became through my evolving practice as a teacher of students who are at-risk. As a teacher in a mainstream school system, I was mainly oriented towards delivering the curriculum and assessing students' outcomes as required to meet academic targets. Primarily, I was more committed to pouring knowledge into the students, than with challenges that affected them as individuals; I saw them as "vessels to be filled..." Even though I was conversant with some of the issues my students were grappling with—learning, behaviour, and socioeconomic difficulties—and helped if resources were readily available, I did not believe there was much I could do in most cases.

My pursuit of studies in middle grades education with a focus on addressing the challenges students with mild to moderate learning difficulties encounter initiated reflection on my pedagogical practice. Through this reflection, I acknowledged my pedagogy was mainly teacher-directed, and deficient in practices that supported students' affect and inclusivity in the classroom. Subsequently, I started adjusting my pedagogical practice to be inclusive and concerned with the issues my students had to grapple with in and beyond the classroom. Changing how I approached my practice sparked the beginning of the transformation my ideology on pedagogy to one that conceptualizes students as a "a fire to be kindled."

I was convinced that this new spark in my pedagogical practice, ignited by the wealth of knowledge gained in my program of study, was adequate to teach a group of adolescents who were identified as at-risk, in a newly-formed alternative education program. The students were identified as at-risk; primarily, through their history of underperforming at the primary

school level, and failed to master the numeracy and literacy tests required to sit the secondary school placement exam. The objective of the program at the time was to provide an alternative pathway for these students to transition to mainstream secondary education schools. I had a sizeable class of 27 adolescents, and the only assistant I had did not have tertiary training. To my dismay, my deep-seated passion to be an agent of transformation was inadequate to reignite enthusiasm in these students. Initially, the students were not very responsive to the instructions they were given on how to conduct themselves on the school grounds. The staff and students in the mainstream school from which the program operated were not quite receptive to the students. The source of their resentment was the stereotype of being ineducable, disruptive, and failing to transition to mainstream secondary school that was attached to most of the students.

In my initial attempt to get the students to be more responsive in their conduct to the expectations, I tried to empower them through different activities. However, I found myself in many instances reverting to using coercion in the form of verbal appeals, and the use and the threat of punitive consequences—suspension and expulsion—to get the students to conform to the school rules and to be responsive to instructions. In retrospect, my coercive approach to the students was a reactive response induced by the pressure I felt from the teaching staff of the mainstream school the program operated from, as well as, the mainstream culture that was still ingrained in my pedagogical practice.

Lagana-Riordan et al. (2011)'s study of at-risk students' perceptions of mainstream schools reported that at-risk students believe mainstream school teachers have good intentions, but are overworked and too limited by time to provide the attention the students need. The students' perception is a genuine issue that should be attended to by school administrators to reduce the number of students that are placed at risk. Furthermore, Lagana-Riordan et al. (2011) found four major challenges expressed by at-risk students in their

perception of traditional schools: “poor teacher relationships”, “lack of safety – violence or victimization on school grounds”, “overly rigid authority – many students interpreted the system of rules at their traditional schools as punitive”, and “problems with peer relationships – students recognize how negative peer influences and poor school culture or climate were detrimental to their school experience” (p. 108-109). School environments with these unfavourable practices affect students’ experiences in mainstream schools.

Students with histories of unfavourable school experiences tend to find it challenging to function in mainstream schools that lack the necessary supports to address their needs (McGee & Lin, 2017). Teachers who are oblivious to these needs and/or unable to provide the relevant support may produce students who feel insignificant. Feelings of insignificance alter students’ responses in the learning environment: “The feelings and emotions that a learner brings to a task can profoundly affect his ability to successfully complete that task. These students [at-risk] may have feelings of anxiety, depression or anger toward school and education” (Smith & Thomson, 2014, p. 118). One of the known features of alternative education programs is the social and emotional support students receive through the relationships they develop with their teachers, and their peers. A supportive staff and a closely connected community are integral to the success of alternative education programs (Smith & Thomson, 2014). Characterized by their flexible timetables, low student-teacher ratios, modified learning modules, and novel ways of teaching, alternative education programs provide individuals who are experiencing failure in mainstream schools with an alternate setting to achieve success (Aron, 2006).

The challenge to develop pedagogical practices that supported all 27 students in behaviour modification and academic engagement was made more difficult with the criticisms of the mainstream classroom teachers. These teachers made it known that the students’ display of maladaptive conduct was devaluing the school’s culture on discipline;

and questioned the potential of the program to have an impact on the students. They felt that a vocational program that provides opportunities to learn hands-on skills and basic academic knowledge was a better option for the students. Implicitly, these teachers were espousing the students as intellectual incompetents; they framed their perceptions on the students' inability to master the academic measurements (standardized assessments), which is the criterion that was used to place students in the program. These rigid and seemingly self-fulfilling views were situated in the students' shortcomings.

Portelli, Shields, and Vibert (2007) define students at-risk as students who are historically underserved by schools, learn in unique ways because of various reasons, or socially identified and categorized as a minority. The school, the education system, and the teachers who spoke negatively about the students in my program used the students' shortcomings to categorize them as at-risk and intellectually incompetent. They disregarded the educational institutions' role in the situation that has been underserving the students through practices that lacked equity. Whether students learn in unique ways or are affected by social challenges, support provided by education systems can reduce the probability of those students underperforming and becoming academically dispositioned with the other students in their social cohorts. If the situation is not addressed, they will continue to accumulate negative school experiences.

As educators, it is important to be mindful of the relationship between students' performance in school and their emotional states. They will interpret and assimilate their experiences. For students, "Failure is a form of rejection. The classroom becomes one of the first social arenas beyond the family in which the child seeks membership" (Harpine, 2011, p. 4). A student's failure to achieve the desired result (such as academic achievement) in the classroom is a deterrent for acceptance into the membership of their classroom, and affects the thoughts they construct about themselves which they may assimilate into their self-

concepts if the failure persists (Harpine, 2011). A poor self-concept can thwart students' motivation; this is a fundamental attribute for students to achieve their desired outcomes. The difficulties students encounter in their school or class may not terminate when they exit; it can have lasting psychological effects on them. School drop-outs are found to experience lower quality mental and physical health than their academically successful peers (Lamb & Markussen, 2011).

One of the many memorable stories I took away from teaching in the alternative education program occurred at the end of one school year. A few days before the school's graduation ceremony, I encouraged (they do not usually attend those events) the top performing students in my center to attend the ceremony and collect their certificates. After the ceremony, one certificate was returned to me; upon inquiring I was told the student was not in attendance. I thought it was strange, because I had seen him just before the ceremony started. The following day I phoned his parents and inquired about his whereabouts during the ceremony. His mother told me he was there; however, he was too petrified to go forward to receive his certificate. He was petrified because it was the first time he had been recognized for performance in school. The student's history of experiencing academic failure and the affect from receiving academic recognition, more so in a public sphere, appear to have impacted his emotional state. The experience of success as well as of failure can have an effect on an individuals' emotional state.

The inadequate support and the lack of successful relatable models within the educational institution had an effect on my emotional state; they were the veins of my struggle to stay inspired. There were moments when I felt as if the students and I had an estranged relationship with the regular school. Feeling estranged in the school environment is not an uncommon feeling experienced by alternative educators and at-risk students. Interestingly, Kim and Taylor (2008) found that teachers in alternative education programs

expressed feeling excluded from the education system. Dissonance in the school environment can negatively impact teachers. Brock and Goodman (2013) assert that the school environment of contemporary society can enhance or destroy teachers' beliefs in their own capabilities within one day. Recognizing the responsibility I had to make a difference in the lives of the disadvantaged students placed in my care, I spurred on through the adversities for an additional four years, constantly reinventing my practice year after year, all to help students to transition to high school. Teachers who recognize that success depends on the right approach and management of their classrooms are always actively reinventing their educational practice, and giving students a myriad of reasons to attend school.

Alternative education teachers should not be made to feel excluded; they are creating success stories with students who have passed through many educators in their prior years in mainstream classrooms where they did not achieve success. Alternative education teachers add value to education systems, often going above and beyond to change the paths for many individuals who would have become delinquent and/or experience a lesser quality of life than successful students in the cohort they started with. The skills these teachers use to achieve outcomes with students who become at-risk should be valued. These teachers have unique approaches to pedagogy, but they are impacting students who struggle to achieve success. Mainstream-classroom teachers can enhance their pedagogical skills to inspire all students, basing their enhancements on the accounts of teachers who have had success instructing struggling students.

Scope and Delimitation

The principles of constructivist grounded theory were deemed ideal to inquire into the experiences of the six teacher and the six graduate participants interviewed for the study. The six teachers were selected to participate because they have taught at or are currently teaching at one of the three alternative education programs (Program A, B, or C) for at-risk students in

the study. Likewise, the graduate participants were selected because they attended either Program A or B. There were no graduate participants from Program C.

The practice of teaching and learning is situationally defined; however, the general understanding of an ideology can be modified and applied to one's specific situation. "Reality is multiple, processual, and constructed—but constructed under conditions" (Charmaz, 2008, p. 402). Constructivist grounded theory methodology supported the investigation to extrapolate the conditions necessary for students placed at-risk from the participants multiple realities.

The study examined three different alternative education programs, each designed for students at-risk of dropping out of school. The programs were located in two different school divisions, in Saskatchewan, Canada. The study is qualitative and thick rich description is provided to support readers in transferring relevant information and ideas to their own contexts.

Significance of The Study

Drop-out rates are a matter of concern for most education systems. School drop-outs tend to encounter challenges that hinder their potential to achieve life goals. For example, an analysis of Statistics Canada survey by Uppal (2017) shows that in 2016, 340,000 youth between the ages of 25 to 34 did not have a high school diploma, which is 9% of the Canadian population of this age. The analysis revealed the following employment outcomes for these young Canadians lacking high school diplomas: a low employment rate compared to individuals with a high school diploma or higher education, a faster decline in employability, and fewer occupations engaged in (Uppal, 2017). The challenges mentioned are just a few of what school drop-outs might face that can lead to a myriad of other challenges. Students drop out of school for varying reasons and drop-out rates differ according to location and

demography. Reducing drop-out rates can prevent and reduce long-term impact on both the individual and the society.

Uppal (2017) found that “one third of the men and one half of the women without a secondary diploma” (from the 9%) were not only unemployed, but also, they were not pursuing secondary education or any form of work training, which is a cost to these individuals and society. Increased educational achievement is deemed to be associated with a higher quality of life that is reflected in improved health of the members of the society and lower levels of criminal activity. Lower educational achievement is a cost to individuals as they are vulnerable to having a lower quality of life; a lower quality of life makes them more susceptible to physical and mental health problems. Individuals with a lower level of education are more likely to engage in crime or other delinquent activities. Therefore, it is likely that healthcare and crime reduction costs will also be lower (Lamb & Markussen, 2011).

Based on statistics of Canada’s penal system; 65% of the individuals admitted to prisons have educational attainment or literacy skill levels below the Grade 8 level. 79% of the same population are without a secondary school diploma. Even though the number of youth in correctional services is decreasing, in 2017/2018 the cost for the operation of Canada’s correctional services was over 5 billion dollars (Malakieh, 2019). Furthermore two-thirds of the income attained by men and women without a high school diploma comes from government transfers (Uppal, 2017). The cost of correction services, of welfare services for individuals who are not disabled but not employed, and of education or training, adds up to an increased cost to the society.

According to the Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) Better Life Index (n.d) the median school completion rate at the upper secondary level in OECD is about 79% for persons between the ages of 25 to 64 years old. Canada is at the

upper end, with a 91% upper secondary school completion rate, which is impressive in comparison to the other countries, but a 9% non-completion rate remains. Nine per cent non-completion amounted to 340,000 youths in 2016, which is a fairly significant figure.

Even though drop-out rates vary from country to country, the fact remains that education systems are not adequately equipping all secondary school graduates with the prerequisite skills necessary to further their education or acquire readiness skills for the work force (Lamb & Markussen, 2011). Notably, I used the word adequately. In some cases, students complete their secondary education, yet their skills are not sufficient to perform well in the workforce or progress to tertiary education. The right supports must be provided, not just for completion, but completion that enables graduates to function with intermediate to strong skills in the workforce or to meet matriculation requirements for tertiary education. Whether school drop-out rates are great or small, not completing high school limits the life possibilities of members of our society; hence, we should always seek methods that show evidence of improving success as we look to reduce the number of students who drop out of school.

The variability in alternative programs' structure and administration is commonly noted as a drawback to comparing and measuring the success of the programs. These differences pose a challenge to defining "drop-out" or to comparatively measure the success of the programs; these disparities result in variations in definitions of school completion and school drop-outs, which also hinder comparative analysis of programs across nations (Lamb & Markussen, 2011). Despite the inconsistencies in alternative program design and administration, the quality work the teachers do with students who were not adequately served in mainstream schools, and alternative programs' ingenious and progressive practices which are vastly different from those in mainstream schools, are the prevailing features that help at-risk students to be successful (Raywid, 1994). That being the case, this study aims to

add to the literature that speaks to the conditions that support at-risk students to achieve success within three very different alternative education programs.

The endorsement of a positive and supportive environment is a significant finding in Kim and Taylor (2008)'s study of an alternative education high school for students at-risk. In their study, with a group of nine student participants, they found none wanted to go back to their mainstream schools; they wanted to remain at the alternative school until they graduated. The students indicated that the welcoming environment and the positive relationships with their teachers were factors that contributed to their success in the program. Creating an environment that is positive and supportive to at-risk students is one of the many practices that mainstream schools can adopt from alternative education programs. Powell and Marshall (2011) also pointed out that schools are not taking adequate measures to improve the skills of teachers who are not yet effective in dealing with students at-risk. Education systems that are ill-equipped and fail to facilitate skills development for teachers are likely to create more students who are at risk for dropping out and/or become academic failures.

Alternative education programs are "a viable solution when students do not meet the goals, standards, and requirements of traditional educational settings" (McGee & Lin, 2017, p.1). Raywid (1994) claimed that some teachers deride the idea that adaptable concepts can be grasped from alternative education programs, partly due to the variety in program structure and lack of equivalence in the standard of the outcomes. However, successful models have been adopted and have produced commendable results. In addition, Raywid (1994) established that one of the key features of successful alternative programs is they are often framed and structured on the ideologies of the teachers who conceptualize them. The teachers who work with students who benefit from these programs are most suitable to provide knowledge on what works best for students with unique needs in the classroom setting.

Canada is among the countries in the world with a high secondary school graduation rate, but Saskatchewan is among the provinces in Canada with high school graduation rates that are below the national average. On-time graduation rates (completing Grade 12, within 3 years of starting Grade 10) for the period 2008 to 2019 range between 75 and 77 percent. The extended graduation rates (completing Grade 12 within 5 years of starting Grade 10) for the same period range between 81 and 85 percent, inclusive of the on-time graduates (Saskatoon Public School Board of Education Annual Report 2018-19). These results also suggest that the 15 to 19 percent that have not completed after 5 years of starting Grade 10 are still struggling to complete because of one shortcoming or another, or have dropped out of school. If they never complete, they will face many problems in the society. Chief among the problems is the economic impact from the challenges to entering the labour market. Fortin et al. (2006) argue it is more feasible to implement measures to keep students in school than to encourage them to return later as adults.

Purpose of Study

The intent of this qualitative study is to explore the experiences of teachers and graduates of three alternative education programs and develop a theory from their descriptions that elucidates the conditions that support the success of students in alternative education programs. The study will seek to answer the following questions: 1. What conditions do teachers of three alternative education programs identify as necessary for at-risk students to succeed? 2. What do graduates of the three programs identify as meaningful or symbolic in the conditions created in the programs? 3. What are the underlying theories in the conditions identified in these programs?

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review will seek to provide background information for the following questions: 1. What conditions do the teacher participants of three alternative education programs identify as necessary for at-risk students to succeed? 2. What do the graduate participants identify as meaningful or symbolic in the conditions created in their programs? 3. What are the underlying theories in the conditions identified in these programs? To create a platform for answering the aforementioned questions, I will first define the key terms; then, I will examine common factors that lead to the creation of students to become at-risk; and finally, I will list the common traits identified in the research of successful alternative education programs.

Defining At-Risk

Definitions of students at-risk often differ based on theoretical perspective and the rationale for the definition. The term at-risk has a wide scope; students are classified as at-risk in relation to circumstances that are deemed to create a risk for the student (Hernandez, 2016). Vang's (2005) analysis of the term at-risk noted that different bodies (school divisions, government agencies) and individuals (researchers, educators) define the term at-risk differently, making communication among them unreliable. Vang pointed out that educators used five different factors for determining who was at-risk: academic performance, attendance, age, transiency, and discipline (behaviour). All these factors are derived from the students' actions and the students' personal short-comings, family life issues, or other factors outside of school. Whilst other definitions of the term at-risk do not align the risk to the students or their family issues, they situate the short-comings within school systems that do not create conditions that inspire and adequately provide for the needs of all students. Definitions for students at-risk are inadequate in depth, and often exclude discourses

regarding the disadvantages that schools contribute to the creation of students at-risk (Wotherspoon & Schissel, 2001).

Portelli, Shields, and Vibert's (2007) definition of students at-risk is a definition that highlights the deficiencies within the school systems that contribute to the creation of students at-risk: students at-risk are students who are historically underserved by schools, because they learn in unique ways due to various reasons, or because they are socially identified and categorized as a minority. Wotherspoon and Schissel (2001) argued that policy and educational administrators and school structures must adjust for students who are at-risk. Disregarding the underlying factors that predispose youths and children to drop out or to fail academically will negatively impact long-term outcomes for students in education systems. Hernandez (2016) and Wotherspoon and Schissel (2001) discussed the term at-risk from different approaches (pedagogical and social justice respectively); nevertheless, they both acknowledge that circumstances which place students at risk can impede their life achievements.

Jordan (2017) examined the historical discourses associated with risk and delinquency, arguing that the term "risk" is stereotypical labeling when used in relation to students; therefore, the term should be disassociated from students as it produces them negatively. "Those students [students at-risk] often exist on the fringes of the traditional public system, othered and segregated in many ways" (Jordan, 2017, p. 32). The traditional public system is viewed as a risk for students with unique needs, failing to identify the academic potential of all students, and depriving students of equal and equitable education (Jordan, 2017). The central arguments on the discourse of at-risk implore school systems to operate with inclusivity, to remove inferiority labels such as "at-risk", to consider and treat all students as having the potential to do well.

Despite that Jordan has implored us to drop the term “at-risk”, I will use the term at-risk in this thesis not as a label but to show the precarious position students are placed in with their education: a position they were made to occupy by the failure of individuals and institutions to address needs affecting their well-being and performance in school. Toldson (2019) believes the term “at-risk” is most controversial when used as a descriptor for students, but should be used for professional and academic circumstances in which the term is used to indicate risk or effectual conditions that prevent or alleviate the anguish students experience. This study is about the academic circumstance showing the risk generated when mainstream teachers are not supported in teaching all the students in their classrooms, and effective conditions that reduce risk or provide relief to students at-risk. In this thesis, the term “student at-risk” will denote adolescents who are school drop-outs, likely to become school drop-outs, or hold propensity to fail in school. The implication is that these students will not gain the prerequisite skills necessary for their post-secondary lives, as a result of the inadequacies and short-comings of the social institutions that are responsible for their growth and development.

Defining School Failure

The definition of student at-risk encompasses the risk of adolescents dropping out of school or failing to acquire the academic skills for life in secondary school; both are identified by the Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development (2012) as causes of school failure during the secondary years. Wotherspoon and Schissel (2001) and Jordan (2017), from a social justice perspective, made it known that students should not be viewed as responsible for their failures; the blame should be placed on the principles and practices of the institutions that govern their education. Students who experience these kinds of shortcomings within education systems are prone to school failure. School failure is defined

by Field, Kuczera, and Pont (2007) (as cited in OECD, 2012) in three different perspectives: systemic, school level, and individual perspective.

From a systemic perspective, school failure occurs when an education system fails to provide fair and inclusive education services that lead to enriching student learning. At the school level, school failure can be defined as the incapacity of a school to provide fair and inclusive education and an adequate learning environment for students to achieve the outcomes worthy of their effort and ability. From an individual perspective, school failure can be defined as the failure of a student to obtain a minimum level of knowledge and skills, which can at the extreme lead to dropping out of school. (p.18)

The systemic and the school level perspectives place the shortcomings on education systems, whilst the individual perspective defines school failure as an inadequacy of the student. None of these perspectives directly speaks to students' negative outcomes as a result of education system shortcomings. Therefore, school failure in this discussion is indicative of students who had negative outcomes or are vulnerable to have negative outcomes in mainstream schools due to the failure of education systems and of schools to provide services and a supportive environment that allow them to have positive outcomes despite students' learning styles or dissimilar socializations or backgrounds.

Classifying Drop-outs

It is in the best interests of the intervention process to obtain knowledge about underlying issues that contribute to students dropping out of school; awareness of this sort influences positive outcomes (Kornick & Hargis 1998). Since knowledge of the associated traits of school drop-outs is necessary for intervention, Kornick and Hargis (1990) (as cited in Kennedy & Morton, 1999) grouped school drop-outs in the following categories:

Quiet dropouts—are low achieving students who experience failure over a period of time, and therefore, simply walk away from school when they attain the age to legally do so.

Disruptive dropouts—are low achieving students who act out their frustration at lack of school success. These students are often suspended for long periods of time and are expelled from public school classrooms and are labelled push-outs.

High academic achievers—could achieve high grades, but leave out of boredom as well as resistance to rigid school rules. These students are labelled push-outs.

In-school dropouts—are those students perceived to be non-achievers or minimal achievers without acting out, while continuing to attend school. (p.70)

To be characterized as at-risk for dropping out or failing in school is not deterministic of the student's reality (Hernandez, 2016). Students are characterized as at-risk through attributes of the risk factors being used by the individual or institution defining the student as at-risk.

Factors Commonly used to Identify Students as At-Risk

Dropping out and academic failure are mainly attributed to school related, personal, and socio-economic issues. The factors that are commonly identified and used to classify students at-risk are categorized in three groups by Smith and Thomson (2014):

Socio-economic factors are related to economic instability or lack of finances that may result from family structure (perhaps a single parent) or family instability.

Personal factors within students comprise factors such as having to work extensive hours to support their households, legal ramifications (reduced or limited attendance due to legal issues in the court system), addiction problems, second language difficulties, playing the role of a sibling parent, teenage pregnancy, and parenting of their own children.

School related factors could include factors such as students might have difficulties attending school regularly, display below standard academic performance, show loss of

confidence due to their poor performance, might have been required to repeat one or more grades, have displayed learning difficulties, or have behavioural difficulties.

The language and phrasing in considerable literature reviewed did not include the systemic or school factors that place students at-risk. Notably, it is standard throughout a significant portion of the literature that students' failings and inadequacies take a greater stance than the shortcomings of the institutions in which they became at-risk. Familial and other personal limitations are inevitable. The structure of a student's family and/or life situation can change at any given time. If the aim of an education system is to maintain institutional ideals, the students will not be adequately served. Educational designs that are focused on the school ideals cater less to the students' individual needs (Harpine, 2011). They are more focused on maintaining their institution's status quo.

The practices and policies that govern school operations would be most effective when students are provided with support that enables them to acquire their education, even though their lives outside of school are imperfect. School practices and policies that create equal opportunities for all students are inclusive and unbiased. In fact, research has shown that lack of inclusivity and equity in school structure and administration create barriers to students' success.

Inequity and low standards in educational institutions form part of the institutional factors that place students at-risk. A study conducted by Christle, Jolivet, and Nelson (2007) found disparities in school structure and administrative policies that are related to high school drop-out rates. The study was done in high schools situated in the state of Kentucky U.S.A and compared a sample of 20 high schools (includes Grades 9-12) with high drop-out rates and 20 with low drop-out rates. The data were collected over two academic years, and revealed marked differences between low and high-drop-out rate schools.

The findings showed that punitive disciplinary school policies, such as suspension or expulsion, co-related positively with high drop-out rates. Some high drop-out rate schools that had a large population of students from low socio-economic backgrounds had administrative staff that were less experienced compared to schools with low drop-out rates and had students of a higher socio-economic background. School climate, student engagement, diversified instruction, and positive student-teacher interaction were better in low drop-out rate schools. Additionally, lower drop-out rate schools had better campus aesthetics than high drop-out rate schools. Apparently, inequities in the policies and practices in relation to staff quality, and the schools' demography significantly affect drop-out rates in some schools.

Defining Alternative Education

Alternative education schools were introduced in Canada in the 1970s as a way of providing diverse education options. In the 1980s, the focus changed to schools for gifted students, offering them a combination of programs that included programs for the artistically gifted, as well as non-traditional high school courses, including courses that were connected to the working world. Subsequent political advocacy influenced school boards to create programs for secondary students who had dropped out of the regular school system to continue their education in a variety of ways (Levin, 2013).

The broad definition for alternative education speaks to education programs that are external to the conventional school system (K-12); however, the term is often used to describe programs for students at-risk who are being served in non-traditional education programs (Aron, 2006). Although alternative education schools were initially designed to provide diverse education options, which still exist today (home schools, schools for the gifted etc.), the most common purpose of alternative education schools/programs in contemporary society is to serve students with unique needs that are not met in the

mainstream education system. Raywid (1994) pointed out that historically it has been unclear as to what the defined standards of operation are for alternative education programs. For example: How are the students entered in the programs? What are the defined traits of the population? Is the alternative education concept, school or education system driven? Queries such as these form part of the usual disparities among alternative education programs.

The organization and administrative procedures of alternative education schools or programs are described by Lange and Sletten (2002) as disparate, which influences the coining of a generalized definition for the term. The researchers' analysis of the term's use found that lack of sameness made it difficult to use to define all programs. The many variations in program models are seen as barriers for examining, evaluating, and determining the performance of alternative schools or programs by data comparison. For instance, there are variations in: "enrollment by choice versus school-determined placement, focus on dropout prevention versus broader efforts to re-engage students who are disenfranchised from the traditional system, and long-term versus short-term enrollment" (Lange & Sletten, 2002, p. 26). These differences are likely based on the fact that alternative-education programs for students at-risk are often created as the need arises for specific demographics, behavioural difficulties, or academic underperformance. Raywid (1994) examined similar inconsistencies within the programs and alluded to whether these programs are for education systems or schools, an indication that the concept is neither fixed to schools or education systems, but created as necessary. Aron's (2006) definition is reflective of the differences in program structure of alternative schools and programs:

Alternative Schools or programs that are set up by states, school districts, or other entities to serve young people who are not succeeding in a traditional public-school environment. Alternative education programs offer students who are failing academically or may have learning disabilities, behavioral problems, or poor

attendance an opportunity to achieve in a different setting and use different and innovative learning methods. While there are many different kinds of alternative schools and programs, they are often characterized by their flexible schedules, smaller teacher-student ratios, and modified curricula. (p. 6)

This review of alternative education literature by Lange and Sletten (2002), recommended the drafting of a national document describing the basic characteristics of alternative programs and their specificity according to state in the U.S. for the purpose of gathering data to determine effectiveness. Data collection is important for the purpose of accountability and planning; however, for consistency across programs, there would have to be some form of standardization, which brings us back to the one size fits all concept of education. The one size fits all concept is known to produce students who fail. Regardless of the inconsistencies within the structure of alternative education programs and schools, there are programs that are meeting the needs of students who were underserved by the mainstream education system and who have exited education systems in different ways (Raywid, 1994). Consistent support that monitors and tracks students' progress while they are in and after they have left the programs should help to determine whether or not a program is effective; if it is not successful, then the necessary support should be provided for improvement.

Alternative education programs are classified in multiple ways; nonetheless, the most cited classification in the literature is that of Raywid (1994), who identified three types:

Type I programs are attended on the basis of the student's choice. They operate with distinct administrative, operational, and instructional differences from traditional schools, and aim to meet the needs of all students, using innovative and resourceful practices.

Type II programs are non-choice and geared towards social maladaptive behaviour adjustment. The objective of type II programs is to redeem students, and help them avoid expulsion, for example, having "in-school suspension or cool-out room" (p. 27). There is no

major adjustment in the curriculum to meet the needs of the students. The mainstream curriculum is often continued in some programs, whilst others may focus on the basics which involve the use of non-critical thinking skills. Reduction in the use of critical thinking limits intellectual stimulation for students. Inadequate intellectual stimulation may not bring about any changes in students' academic performance; consequently, students will continue to fail because of the non-stimulating educational design and become *quiet drop-outs* as delineated by Kronick and Hargis (1998).

Type III programs cater for the needs of students with both social maladaptive behaviors and academic difficulties. Fundamentally, the program goals are to improve the students' academic performance as well as facilitate the development and use of appropriate social skills.

It must also be noted type III programs are not rigid in characteristics; they can be a mix with features from type I or II. In addition, Raywid, 1994 also pointed out that type I and II programs are positivistic; therefore, the challenges are derived from beliefs in the students' inabilities, and the focus of the programs is to transform the student instead of reducing or eliminating the factors that create the risks.

Notably, there is a vast amount of literature about alternative education schools and programs that address students at-risk at the secondary level in comparison to the elementary level. For this study, alternative education will refer to schools or programs that admit students by self-enrollment or by referral, with an educational design that provides remedial and/or rehabilitation or credit attainment programs for students who have dropped out of school, are at-risk for academic or school failure, or are at-risk of dropping out at the secondary level.

A number of the studies that examined successful alternative education programs and schools highlighted some of the following common traits as attributes to the success of the

schools/programs: reduced class size, changes in instruction modes and quality, heightened student-teacher relationship, relevant curriculum, social skills support, modified learning environments.

Physical Classroom Environment

The construction of learning environments should be concerned with all components of the learning process. The learning process is connected to the physical learning environment and contributes positively to learning outcomes (Guney & Al, 2012). A classroom's physical environment is inclusive of class size, the physical building, learning resources, as well as seating arrangement, and the room physiology (Suleman, 2014).

Below is a synopsis of Guney and Al's (2012) description of the learning environments for six learning theories: behaviourist—student seating is arranged in rows, the teacher's desk is central, and activities are teacher directed; cognitivist—provides opportunities for students to “explore, manipulate, experiment, and search for answers by themselves” and interact with the outdoors (p. 2335); constructivist—provides opportunities for knowledge construction which endorses experience and contextual relevance, spaces for social interaction, seating arrangement supports individual and group study; experiential—utilizes indoor and outdoor learning spaces, endorses social learning, accommodates various modes of learning in the classroom and provides opportunities for students to evaluate and assess their actions; humanistic—allows students to add their personal touches to their learning environment, encourages independence, students can work in groups focusing on varying issues simultaneously, building relationships and acquiring knowledge from each other; social-situational—accommodation is provided for students to interact socially, participate in groups, and acquire knowledge through observation and social interaction.

Learning space and seating organization.

Effective classroom seating arrangement promotes fervent engagement in the learning process and collaborative work among peers (Suleman, 2014). The traditional row-column layout in classrooms reduces flexibility (Guney & Al, 2012). Seating arrangement that provides clear visibility among participants (teacher and students) encourages interaction which contributes to the formation of relationships among students, and between teacher and students, which builds community. A physically appealing classroom elicits feelings of home-likeness in the students which is usually a space that students want to be in. Creating a classroom that is welcoming and homelike involves efforts to personalize the space. Teachers and students who personalize their classroom space may add décor or design their preferred seating arrangement which is a challenge for those secondary school teachers who share classrooms (Phillips, 2014).

Adolescents' conceptualization of their school's social and physical environment can potentially impact their self-esteem (Eato & Lener, 1981). School environments that are supportive of self-esteem development display equity for all students, engendering the belief in students that they all have the same entitlement in the school (Guney & Al, 2012). "The physical structure of a classroom is a critical variable in affecting student morale and learning" (Phillips, 2014). Students who feel comfortable in their classrooms, show more interest and enthusiasm and garner more from their teachers (Suleman, 2014).

Teacher: pupil ratio.

One of the defining features of alternative education programs/schools is smaller classes (Aron, 2006). McGee and Lin (2017) contend that smaller classes are beneficial to teachers and supportive of students' learning needs by increasing teacher-student relations, improving relationships between home and school, maximizing student engagement, improving instruction standards and the rate of behaviour adjustment. Disadvantaged

students can make considerable progress with the benefits a smaller class; however, reduction in class size must be implemented with changes to pedagogical practices (OECD, 2012). The concept is more progressive when its implementation is paired with pedagogical training for teachers on strategies and practices that work best with smaller classes.

In this thesis, a low teacher: pupil ratio means fewer students per teacher. A high teacher: pupil ratio means more students per teacher. For research on alternative education programs, low teacher: pupil ratios have been shown to support success for students.

Affective Classroom Environment

Positive classroom climate.

Health Behaviour in School-aged Children (HBSC) in Canada: A Focus on Relationships, national survey (2014) found in their school climate study that 77% of boys and 80% of girls in Grade 6 felt that their teachers cared about them; however, this number steadily declined through the upper grades. The lowest percentages were seen in Grades 9 and 10, where Grade 9 had 58% boys, 54% girls; and Grade 10 had 59% boys and 54% girls. The study did not delineate the makeup of the remaining percentages; therefore, I presume that an average of 21.5% Grade 6, 44% of Grade 9, and 43.5% of Grade 10 students felt that teachers do not care about them. In addition, the survey also found that it is a matter of concern that collectively students between Grades 6 to 10 had a pattern of giving fewer positive views of school and showing connectedness to school. The frequency of the occurrences is higher in the middle to secondary grades. The highest level of disconnectedness was seen in students' responses in Grades 8 and 10, with the least connected reporting the most unfavourable achievement outcomes and receiving the least support from others. The findings in the national survey imply a relationship between students' disconnectedness from school and their achievement.

Statistics Canada analysis of the Youth In Transition Survey (YITS)—a survey that collected data from 15 years old students in the year 2000 and again in 2002 when the same students were 17 years old—compared dropouts and continuing students and graduates in the sample group to identify patterns that were indicative of the risk of dropping out. The most prominent category identified for dropping out was achieving the age of 17. In terms of school climate and engagement, the students who dropped out were less socially connected and underperformed academically at age 15 compared to their peers who continued or graduated. This finding implies academic and social disengagement during the middle school years may place students at risk of dropping out of school. They become at risk of dropping out because they have become disengaged from two of their fundamental areas of their school lives. “Most children fail in school not because they lack the necessary cognitive skills, but because they feel detached, alienated, and isolated from others and from the educational process” (Beck & Malley, 1998). Smith and Thomson (2014) contended in their psychological synthesis of students at-risk that students are burdened by their negative experiences in their mainstream schools, “they may have feelings of anxiety, depression or anger toward school and education” (p. 118).

Fortin et al. (2006) believe students at-risk of dropping out of school vary in their characteristics. The research on which this claim was based highlighted a group of students whose academic performance was fairly good and who enjoyed good relationships with their teachers; yet they furtively engaged in acts of misconduct common to students who were deemed to have academic and behavioural challenges. These students were described as “antisocial covert behaviour type” but a closer look at their responses revealed the students perceived their homes as disorganized and deficient in rules (p. 10).

The aforementioned YITS (2002) study identified apathy, difficulty with teachers and academic work, expulsion, and inadequate credits as the most frequent reasons given for

leaving school early. School-related issues are a fraction of the myriad of issues students may be grappling with in their educational experience. School-related issues are probably compounded with other issues outside of the school; it is possible that school could be the only place that holds any promise for positive social interaction, acceptance, and belonging (Beck & Malley, 1998). Students who grapple with feelings of negativity are more likely to lack motivation to complete school tasks; therefore, it is imperative that alternative education programs endeavour to create an atmosphere that is different from that in mainstream schools (Smith & Thomson, 2014). Positive classroom climates encourage good relations with students at-risk. Classroom climates that do not facilitate positive relationships contribute to the risk of students dropping out (Fortin et al., 2006). Forming a relationship with the teacher is the platform upon which students will begin to feel accepted and connected initially, and the wider school community will follow suit (Beck & Malley, 1998).

As was noted in the HBSC (2014) national survey, students do notice whether teachers care about them. There are several arguments about the ethics of care and what it means to care in education.

Caring in education.

Hult (1979) asserted on pedagogical caring that ‘caring about’ is a matter of being concerned about the individual without the specific attributes associated with ‘caring for.’ Caring for should be conceptualized as appraising, with the quality of the appraisal contingent on the nature of the giver, the receiver, and the relationship. Hult’s pedagogical caring is constructed on “three levels of recognition: the student as a unique individual, as a person, and as a role occupant” (p. 243), and serves as lenses necessary for the teacher to execute pedagogical caring. As a person, regardless of context, the teacher shows regard to students and acknowledges them as equals. In the individual status, the teacher perceives the student in a humane manner with rights that the teacher has a responsibility to honour. As a

role occupant (student) the teacher does not recognize the student as an equal, but rather as one for whom specific needs and expectations must be met through pedagogical practice as a matter of the stipulated rights.

Nguyen (2016) posits that caring is relevant to educational practice, and is not separate and apart from the practice, but in fact, it forms a part of the bedrock of good quality teaching. Caring is an active process between the parties involved (the giver as well as the receiver of the care). Noddings (1984) describes caring as relational practice. The individual giving the care needs to actively interact with the individual requiring the care to gain an understanding of what is actually needed (the care offered might not be accepted if it is based solely on the giver's standards). How is the care received and does it meet the needs of the individual requiring the care? According to Noddings (1984), the process does not get to a state of completeness if the individual is not receptive to the care. Nguyen further elaborated that both caring for and caring about are relevant to the process of caring in teaching. Caring about occurs when the teacher recognizes and conceives (attitudinal) that the student has needs to be met whereas caring for involves acting on the concerns that were conceived in the caring-about phase to meet the needs of the student. Identifying and acting to relieve the student of the need does not necessarily have to be carried out by the teacher. The need can be recognized by another individual or the teacher becomes the one to carry out the action to meet the need. If the needs to be met are outside of the teacher's capabilities, then he/she can direct those needs to the individual or institution that can care for those needs.

Good teaching is entrenched in both caring for and caring about. Caring about is reflective of the teacher being attuned to the students' development and capabilities to meet achievement objectives and to identify the shortcomings that are preventing them from doing so. It is from this process that a determination can be made about what is needed to bridge the gap from the shortcomings. Subsequently, the process of caring for will begin when the

teacher takes the relevant action to relieve or reduce the impact of the need so that the student can function and work towards meeting achievement goals. It is at this point that good teaching is taking place because good caring is activated. “Good caring necessarily involves the engagement with the other; therefore good teaching is dependent on the receptiveness and responsiveness from the student to the teacher’s caring efforts” (Nguyen, 2016, p. 294). If the student is receptive and responsive to the actions of caring for, then ‘completeness’, according to Noddings’ ethics of care, will have been taking place.

With “receptiveness and responsiveness from the student” as the defining conditionality of good teaching, the teacher has to first get the student to be receptive. Students at-risk, many of whom have had to endure uncomfortable life experiences, might not be eager in being receptive to a teacher’s gesture of showing care. Glasser (1986) in the text *Control Theory in the Classroom* contends that for too long people operated on the misguided thought “what we do to or for people can make them behave the way we want even if it does not satisfy them” (p. 20). In the case of teachers and students, teachers cannot coerce students to be receptive to their gestures if there is no indication to the student that one or more of their needs will be satisfied. Without the demonstration of the potential satisfaction of a need, the possibility of the student being receptive might be minimal, and become a barrier to good quality teaching, regardless of the teacher’s pedagogical skills.

Reaching out to students when they show signs of feeling emotionally distressed can initiate the process for the teacher to help (Lagana-Riordan et al., 2011). Being recognized as a “person” will encourage some degree of satisfaction and evoke reception. Students who have been in alternative programs tend to attribute their success to teachers showing care about their lives and belief in their potential to achieve (Powell & Marshall, 2011).

Positive relationships.

Positive relationships with students should not only be practiced when students are performing well in academics and are being submissive to the classroom rules, it but should also be practiced for work in progress in the planned activities of the program. Maillet (2017) wrote about the six powerful practices of alternative education programs and included positive relationships among the powerful practices. Creating positive relationships with students at-risk is endorsed as a fixed part of alternative education programs, not merely a random act. Sessions must be factored into the programs for teachers, administrators, and students to connect on a group or individual level, whichever is necessary at the time. In the program that was studied (Maillet, 2017), time was factored into the program's activities to build positive relationships with students through meetings used for recreation, problem-solving and social skills development; this helped the teachers gain a mental picture of students' personalities and characters. Maillet (2017) reported that this practice was successful, through the observable changes in the students' behaviour. Operating in this manner will lessen the possibility of teachers overlooking students who are not externalizing risk characteristics, and the likelihood of students engaging in risky behaviour. Powell and Marshall (2011) believed schools do not give adequate attention to teachers in building skills that enable them to form bonds with at-risk students. Rather the focus is placed on school policies that espouse punitive approaches.

Instructional Quality

Instruction in some mainstream classrooms is often described as non-inclusive of all learners. Quality instruction should be designed to impact all students, using multidimensional approaches and curricular material that is applicable to the students' needs (McGee & Lin, 2017). To reduce the number of students dropping out of traditional schools, teachers should work towards diversifying instruction through learning material and modes of

delivery. This is not a task without challenges, especially working with students who have developed apathy towards school or who engage in antisocial behaviours and/or are experiencing academic challenges. Hernandez (2016) recommends that teachers approach pedagogy with flexibility, effort, and adaptability. Flexibility is necessary for taking a non-linear approach in delivering the curriculum; teachers must engage students using interactive lessons (e.g. teaching lessons using games), have students actively participate in instruction when possible, and provide opportunities for student to give constructive feedback. In order to adapt instruction, teachers should resist forcing their preconceived ideas on students, and actively engage students in an effort to assess their varying personalities and preferences, so students can feel accepted in the class. Students are more appreciative of teachers who make an effort to help them with their academic work and guide them along the path that is necessary for them to succeed.

The success of such practices is not always dependent on the teacher, since teachers' efforts are sometimes stymied by workload and policies. For example, the size of the class may limit how many students a teacher is able to connect with. Lagana-Riordan et al. (2011), in their study of at-risk students' perspectives, found that many at-risk students blamed overwhelming workloads and administrative duties for teachers' inability to establish good relationships and provide them with individual attention. Lagana-Riordan et al. argued that overwhelming workloads and administrative duties must be addressed through school administration to enable traditional classroom teachers more flexibility to assist students.

As an administrator of an alternative education school, Maillet (2017) stated that the school's objective for instruction was to "provide active, creative, and service driven instruction that would reengage students in their own learning" (p. 234). Taking an active and creative approach that reengages students in their own learning enables students to play an active and responsible role in their own learning. When opportunities are provided for

students to be active, responsible participants in their learning, it facilitates the development of educational resilience, which supports a positive classroom atmosphere (McGee & Lin, 2017).

A positive classroom atmosphere is deeply interwoven with the quality of instruction. Hernandez (2016) maximised class engagement by integrating students' life experiences as well as his own with the instruction. He noted commonalities with his lived experiences and the students', and found, for example, experiences with law enforcement and social injustices. Through their engagement students shared their thoughts on topical issues. Without realizing they were profoundly engaged, they felt judgment-free, respected for who they were, and expressed pleasure engaging in the discussions. These discussions were used as the platform to teach core language skills; hence, the instruction had academic and therapeutic value.

The use of general curricula content for instructional planning is not always suitable to meet the needs of students, especially for students identified as minorities in societies where there is a dominant ethnicity. Hence, teachers should be selective when using a general curriculum to plan instruction in alternative education programs. The content used for instruction planning should show equity and inclusivity in meeting the immediate learning needs for students. In an ethnographic study using a social justice approach, Albers and Frederick (2013) were impressed by the actions of two Latino teachers who taught at-risk Latino students from the bottom percentile reading standardized test scores. The teachers were dissatisfied with the lack of cultural relevance within the curriculum content and brought it to the attention of the school's administration; however, no definitive action was taken. The teachers were not deterred. They attended to the matter themselves, and designed a curriculum that was culturally relevant to the students' ethnicity and youth subcultures. This improved the quality of instruction within the program. Curriculum relevance plays a critical

role in quality instruction, which will be discussed in more details in the section on curriculum below.

Quality staffing.

Quality staffing is necessary for quality instruction in alternative education programs. It is common for at-risk students to be faced with intersecting challenges; hence, teachers cannot offer quality instruction without the appropriate skill sets to address student difficulties. “To address the multiple needs of these students [at-risk] and promote healthy physical, emotional development, appropriate staffing is necessary.” That is, staff capable of handling “emotional, behavioural and mental health needs of students” (Lehr, Soon & Ysseldyke, 2009, p. 30). These are specialized skills that are mainly common to special education teachers or regular teachers who received training in that area. To address teachers’ skill deficit to handle students’ “emotional, behavioural and mental health needs” Lagana-Riordan et al. (2011) recommend that schools take the initiative to provide opportunities for educators to gain knowledge on mental health and social problems, equipping educators with the skills to better understand at-risk students and their circumstances.

The common rhetoric used by teachers who deemed themselves incapable of instructing students of minority groups are cultural differences and lack of oppressive experiences (Ullucci, 2007). Uncommon experiences and/or shared culture should not be an excuse to not form positive relationships and to not design instruction that is culturally responsive to students’ backgrounds. Brock and Goodman (2013) recommend that teachers fill their cultural and/or experience deficit by taking time to research the communities and backgrounds of their students to prepare for instruction, inquire about prominent and frequently occurring social justice issues, gather information about the students’ demography, and get to know the prominent leaders in their communities. This type of research should supply teachers with insight on the students’ circumstances and experiences and thus be able

to integrate these circumstances and experiences with the instruction. Students at-risk will value their teachers' interest in their lives outside of school (Lagana-Riordan et al., 2011). Acquiring a position of value with students will increase the likelihood of teachers helping the students, because the students will become convinced that the teacher has real interest in them.

Curriculum relevance.

Instruction that is worthy of merit requires a curriculum that resonates with students (McGee & Lin, 2017). Curricula for at-risk students are most beneficial when they are multifaceted—inclusive of academic, career skills training, and other life skills (McGee & Lin, 2017; Aron, 2006). Alternative education programs focused on credit attainment may not adequately meet the needs of students in these programs. Kim and Taylor's (2008) case study of an alternative high school found the curriculum lacking even though students were successfully improving their academic performance and behaviour through the creation of a positive school climate. The researchers deemed the curriculum as deficient because students had started to embrace the idea of a college education and having a career; however, there was no precollege and career preparation guidance in the program's curriculum. Alternative education programs that teach mainly academic and minimal or no future related skills are not comprehensively meeting the needs of students. Gunn, Chorney and Poulsen's (2009) review of projects that are directed towards keeping students in school in the province of Alberta reported that career related programs are developed to help students to become conscious of the various options available post-graduation. This is an essential pre-career activity to help students to think about and envision themselves beyond their current situations.

Culturally-relevant curricula are also essential and must be taken into consideration for alternative education programs. Curricula that are culturally relevant can be a deciding

factor on whether or not a student learns and/or completes the alternative program. Gunn, Chorney and Poulsen's (2009) findings on the Alberta program noted: "[s]everal projects were strongly committed to enhancing cross-cultural awareness within their school(s) and community. For many minority populations, the feeling of isolation is a leading cause of early school leaving" (p. 21). Using the curriculum to eliminate these tendencies, the Alberta program infused Aboriginal cultural practices in the curriculum which sparked feelings of dignity in Aboriginal students and provided students of other ethnicities with Aboriginal cultural insight (Gunn et al., 2009). Ladson-Billings (2014) described this pedagogical practice as cultural competence: "the ability to help students appreciate and celebrate their cultures of origin while gaining knowledge of and fluency in at least one other culture" (p. 1). The appreciation and celebration of cultures within schools and classrooms encourages a positive classroom climate. Albers and Frederick (2013) believe it is imperative that teachers develop an understanding of their position on curriculum content, delivery, and how the students' cultures are reflected and taught; an irrelevant and/or poorly delivered curriculum may impede or limit how much some or all students learn.

Transition to Mainstream Schools

At-risk students who return to their traditional classrooms are susceptible to regress on the adjustments they made to their conduct if they do not receive the right support in their schools. Transitioning back to the regular classroom is not always a favourable occasion for students. In some cases, the traditional teachers and administrators revert to labeling students who return with the same negative characterizations used prior to their enrollment in the alternative program (Powell & Marshall, 2011). Relations were found to be very poor in schools where teachers were more involved with enforcing school policies than teacher-student relations (Powell & Marshall, 2011). At-risk students would have become accustomed to the supportive relationships and positive atmosphere of the alternative

education program; returning to a classroom climate less favourable or the same as it was prior to the student's removal might result in the resurgence of resistant behaviour.

Summary

This literature review has unearthed effective school practices that have proven successful in alternative education programs, as well as concerns about practices that create barriers to the success of students with unique needs in education systems. The main concerns that arise from the review are the little to no literature that speaks to the tracking of students, the reports of the lack of transition support for students who return to mainstream classrooms, and the reports of lack of succession plans for successful alternative programs. According to OCED (2012), the probability of children becoming successful in life relies heavily on the quality of education. Therefore, concerns about the impact of poorly educated individuals on society should instigate interest in the success of students at-risk after these programs, that is, tracking and providing students with transition support. Tracking students' progress can provide data that support effective planning which will improve the programs over time. Programs that are designed to and are equipped to adequately meet the needs of students at-risk can reduce the negative impact on society.

Individuals who are uninformed about institutional and poor-quality educational practices that create students at-risk tend to direct blame on a lack of effort, or issues related to students or their backgrounds. There needs to be more education for teachers and education system administrators on how unfair and non-inclusive practices and policies in the education systems influence issues that place students at-risk. Education Policies and practices that are equitable and inclusive will result in the creation of learning environments that aim to support the needs of all students. The chapters below show that differences in the pedagogical practices and teacher-student experiences in successful alternative classrooms are proof that success is possible for diverse students underserved by education systems.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

Introduction

The analysis of this study examined the conditions necessary for at-risk students to achieve success in alternative education programs as described by six teachers who worked in three alternative education programs for at-risk students and six graduates who have participated in two of the three programs described. Within a perspective of symbolic interactionism, constructivist grounded theory was chosen for the methodology.

Choice of Methodology

Constructivist grounded theory is derived from grounded theory methodology, which was developed by Glaser and Strauss in the 1960s. Grounded theory methodology is deemed as positivistic in nature: it is largely focused on observing social processes and creating theories from the observations without actively participating in the data creation (Charmaz, 2006). Conversely, constructivist grounded theory is interpretivist in its attributes: it is largely focused on the interactions and interpretations of human behaviour. Constructivist grounded theorists describe the researchers' experience in the process, explicating their emotions, beliefs and values. Individuals are not detached from their values and beliefs in the interpretation process; they should not be left out of the research, but acknowledged, to attenuate the possibility of including predetermined categories (Cresswell, 2012).

As the grounded theory methodology became popular, Glaser and Strauss took opposing positions on whether the methodology should stay true to its foundational principles or evolve into an interactive approach. Glaser believed that the methodology should be faithful to its original principles, whereas Strauss became fascinated with the interactions and interpretations of human behaviour, believing that they create meanings. Constructivist grounded theorists acknowledge all participants (researcher and subjects) as constructors who

bring subjectively formed beliefs to the research situation that are shaped by their experiences and positions (Charmaz, 2014).

The case study methodological approach has many features that are fitting to the nature of the phenomenon under investigation. A collective case study seemed suitable to inquire the three programs studied. Contrastingly, the programs studied are non-homogenous in their designs, functions, and the realities of the twelve participants. Case studies favour boundedness of its cases—the boundaries established are the conditions for what is taken into account or excluded from the case under study. “Exemplary collective case studies... [show that] the issue of interest to the researcher is sufficiently similar across cases” (Compton-Lily, 2013, p. 56). Case studies are apt for situations in which its impractical to disassociate the intricacies of the phenomenon from context (Merriam, 1988).

Constructivism as a qualitative research approach maintains the ideological assumption that individuals seek to gain understanding within their places of existence, while creating their own meanings from their experiences and directing their constructions of specific things or objects. Constructivist researchers focus on the intricacies of the individual’s account of their experiences within that person’s context, rather than generalizing them (Creswell, 2014). Unearthing the complexities of the meanings created, constructivist grounded theory method assumes that “reality is multiple, processual, and constructed—but constructed under conditions” (Charmaz, 2008, p. 402). In this sense, conditions imply context and circumstances. Fundamental to the ideas behind constructivist grounded theory is that all experiences are socially-constructed; put another way, there is no single reality. The methodology supports the revelation of multiple realities and ways of knowing (Charmaz, 2006).

Constructivist grounded theory approach was selected to investigate this phenomenon for its aptness to facilitate the non-homogenous nature of the student at-risk population, the

variety in program structure and the myriad of pedagogical approaches used by teachers in alternative education programs. Students at-risk are identified and placed in alternative education programs for multiple reasons; hence, success and achievement vary for each student. Although programs are different in terms of student demography, pedagogical approach and structure, they shared the commonality of success, which is intended to impact the students' lives beyond the alternative programs. Charmaz (2006) stated that "constructivists study how – and sometimes why – participants construct meanings and actions in specific situations" (p. 130). Constructivist grounded theory afforded the opportunity to examine the processes of how success was achieved in the alternative education programs, while looking at why the participants found and constructed meanings from their experiences.

The process by which participants construct meanings is a key component of the constructivist grounded theory methodology. The construction of meanings depicted the value that participants grasped from their experiences, which is largely understood and confirmed through the participants' accounts of the events (Charmaz, 2006). Data that support the production of experiential events in constructivist grounded theory are sought by scrutinizing the participants' accounts to gain understanding and identify the social processes involved in the way participants construct their worlds. For instance, my research question (What do the graduate participants identify as meaningful or symbolic in the conditions created in their programs?) was intended to identify the meanings participants constructed to inform and modify their assumptions of reality. Charmaz (2006) purported that an understanding of the constructions of individuals can evoke the rationale for such constructions.

The delicate nature of the circumstances and/or events that often create students at-risk does not favour methodologies with a highly structured data gathering process.

Constructivist grounded theory methodology generally is not restricted by highly structured data gathering procedures, as this may restrict the gathering of rich data. Flexibility with the methods, such as the semi-structured interviews, the open-endedness—following-up on conceptual leads introducing questions that inquire into emerging concepts from previous interviews in later interviews—enabled the gathering of rich data (Charmaz, 1990). The gathering of rich data was necessary to bring to the surface “how, when, and to what extent the studied experience is embedded in larger and often, hidden positions, networks, situations and relationships. Subsequently, differences and distinctions between people become visible as well as the hierarchies of power, communication, and opportunity that maintain and perpetuate such differences and distinctions” (p. 130-131).

Theoretical interpretations of the phenomenon in constructivist grounded theory rely on meanings derived from the events that emerge from the investigation (Charmaz, 2008); however, they are not exempted from the influence of the one doing the theorizing. The theories are within the interpretation of the individuals who are theorizing (Charmaz, 2006). The process of theorizing is inherently prone to influence owing to the fact that knowledge and theories are perceived as “situated in particular positions, perspectives and experiences” (Charmaz, 2006, p.127). Therefore, interpretations are impressed upon by the experiences of our worlds (Cresswell, 2014). In that regard, researchers’ reflexivity must be taken into account.

My prior experience working in alternative education programs was one way in which I was directly situated in the study; however, my motive was not to recreate the participants’ experiences. I interpreted their actions, and analysed the processes involved in creating success stories. The interpretation was not exclusive of the circumstance; it was located within the studied phenomenon (Charmaz, 2008). The relativity and contextual differences of each participant and program created primary data for the study.

To create primary data, I explored the conditions teachers identified as necessary for at-risk students to achieve success and examined them through multiple perspectives from different contexts, as befitted the multiple realities assumed by the approach. The reason for seeking the perspective of former students and teachers is their varied experiences and perspectives are considered subjective, based on the assumption that “humans engage with their world and make sense of it based on their historical and social perspectives—We are born in a world of meaning bestowed upon us by our culture” (Crotty (1998) as cited in Cresswell, 2014, p. 9). In other words, historical background and culture shape the meanings humans attach to their experiences, but it is the individual’s understanding and assigned meaning that renders those meanings symbolic or non-symbolic (Charmaz, 2014).

To bring generality to the subjective experiences and perspectives of the participants, a symbolic interactionist perspective was used to explicate their interpretations, interactions and actions associated with the phenomenon to determine their process of understanding and rendering meanings symbolic.

Choice of Perspective

Symbolic interactionists are of the view that an individual’s world is comprised of objects they interact with based on the meanings the objects have for them. The meanings the objects have for each individual are embedded in the nature of the objects, and are classified in three states—physical, social, and abstract. These meanings emerge from the individual’s interaction with the object, and are peculiar to the individual it is an object for. Each individual’s perception of, and actions towards, an object are conditional to the meanings the object holds for the individual (Blumer, 1986).

An individual’s actions originate in the perspectives used to define situations; consequently, these actions along with the actions of other people serve as an impetus to the situation and potentially influence change in perspective of “what is, was, or will be

happening” (Charmaz, 2014, p. 262). A person with a symbolic interactionist perspective can compare past and present events in analysis; for example, using perspectives constructed in the past to inform the present. Defining the premises that underlie the conditions that teacher participants created in the alternative education programs, their actions and processes were examined. The six former students of two of the alternative programs’ experiences were compared to develop an understanding the differences between their mainstream school experiences and their alternative education program experiences and what these experiences meant for them.

The Researcher

I worked as a teacher for over 8 years, five of which were spent teaching at-risk students in middle grades. As a former teacher of an alternative education program, my positioning might be deemed questionable, in regard to the themes and categories I developed or how I interpreted the data. For that reason, I was careful not to transfer or force inappropriate themes. To address this, I did two things: first, I ensured that the themes and categories were specific to this study—that they emerged from this study, and, second, my focus was maintained on the setting and group under investigation. According to constructivist ideology our interpretative skills are influenced by our experiences, which we are not always cognizant of (Cresswell, 2014); in that regard, several steps were taken to reduce the probability of such occurrences. Memos were written not only to guide the data interpretation, but to aid in the evaluation and analysis process of my hypothesis and actions while gathering data. The memos are reflective and analytical of the data collection process and reduced the possibilities of forcing data and categories, and thus supported constructive analysis of and intuitiveness about the data (Charmaz, 2006). My relationship and interaction with the participants were research related; all interactions were for the purpose of inquiring for the study. In addition to my years of service as a teacher, I have credentials in primary and

middle grades education (specializing in students with learning difficulties). To support the investigation process, I completed training with the Nvivo data management system as well as graduate level courses in research.

Settings

Program A.

This is a full year, all subject area, Grade eight program. The students are recruited into this program when they are towards the end of their Grade seven year. The teachers working in the program visit various schools and introduce the program to the students in their schools. Currently, the program is introduced to students through what is called a Gym Blast. Gym Blast takes place in the gym of the elementary school that Program A teachers are visiting. Potential students get an opportunity to learn about the program and engage in activities with the teachers and students who are currently in the program. Students who express an interest to participate in the program go through an application process, which begins with the filling of an application form with their basic information and signed by their parents, and information gathered from their school and current Grade seven teacher. Afterwards, 70 to 80 students are invited to attend the overnight application camp in the month of May prior to the semester when they would begin Grade eight. The teachers and the students get a chance to know each other, participating in group and initiative task activities similar to some of what they will be doing in the program. The trip is coordinated by the current teachers, other adults and past students.

During application camp, the students are expected to demonstrate that they are capable of following instructions, work independently, keep themselves and their fellow classmates safe, while they experience what it would be like to be in the program and determine for themselves whether or not the program is a good fit for them during their grade eight year. The teachers, past students, and the other adults involved observe and evaluate the

students' participation in the activities as part of the selection process. From the evaluation, students believed to be a good fit for the program will be placed in a lottery. Twenty-eight students are drawn from the lottery and invited to attend the following semester. Students who decline the invitation are replaced with students who did not get drawn and had been placed on a waiting list. It is important to note that the selection works two ways. As a result of the application camp, individual students might decide they do not want to be in the program.

The program operates within an elementary school using a regular Grade eight curriculum. The room in which instruction is carried out has no traditional student classroom desk; the students, and the teachers too (when they were not doing administrative work at their desk), sat on the couches arranged in a circle. Tables that can be pulled down were available if a student needed one. It was obvious that students felt at home, with some sitting on the floor when they felt like it. The room was decorated with the students' artwork. The pedagogical approach is project-based and experiential, including many place-based out-of-school activities. The class does about seven camping trips per year, as well as the other out-of-school excursions. All trips focus on learning. Programs similar to this one in the same school division have a fee assessed for individual students and their families. Program A, specifically oriented for at-risk students, is subsidized, and thus, no fee is assessed.

Program B.

This is a program for adults to earn Grade 12 credits, and operates within an alternative high school. Students who qualify for the program would not have earned a credit in the past year and are at least 18 to 21 years of age when they start the program. Occasionally, younger students participate in the program temporarily to take credits because they need an environment that meets their need of having the stability of staying in the same room all day with only two teachers and to focus on only one subject for twenty days. The

program operates on the same time schedule as the school it is within. All the credits earned are modified. The seven essential credits needed to attain the adult 12 are modified except for Catholic studies because there is no modified curriculum for the subject. Students who come into the program and show exceptional academic potential to do regular credits have the option to do so in the regular classes within the high school located in the same building.

The students are referred to the school by persons connected with them through an organization, or by parents, or they can refer themselves. They attend the program for a variety of reasons: academics, addiction issues, being single parents, among others. After the referral, they go through an intake process to determine if the school is a good fit for them. Depending on their history, school experiences, and age they may be placed in the Program (most students are accepted).

Apart from the credit courses, the students participate in a work-education program, learning work preparation skills such as composing a resumé, cover letters, how to behave in a job interview. After learning these skills, the students intern at various business places. The classroom is similar to a typical school room with desk and chairs; however, the low teacher: pupil ratio allows for a semi-circle arrangement. The teacher and the assistant's desks are placed to the side of the students' desks. More often than not, the teacher and the assistant take chairs to sit with the students, providing one-on-one support when general instruction is not being done. There are framed graduation pictures of graduates on the wall, and a few pieces of students' artwork (poetry and drawings).

Outside of their academic needs, there is a full-time counsellor in the building for the students in the program to access. On the basis of funding availability, an Elder is made available to offer counsel to Indigenous students. Students also have access to personnel outside of the school that they might need for support based on what is going on with them.

They have the advantage of being fast-tracked too, such as to a child-psychologist or other mental health personnel or institutions.

Program C.

The school has been operating for 25 years. It is a home that has been retrofitted by converting some rooms into classrooms, and is located on a farm overlooking a pristine river. The school building is a large house, and has a low number of students and a low teacher: pupil ratio. On roll, there are 1.6 teachers to 18 students, and a full-time program facilitator. The program caters for students in Grades 9, 10, and 11. The mainstream curriculum is used, but activities such as clubs and sports are not offered. The students are picked up from various locations in the city and bused to the farm school every school day. The objective of the school is to provide a stable environment for students to achieve their academic goals while working on their individual issues.

The students are referred to the program by their home schools. The process begins with the submission of a referral form to the farm school. The principal and the administrator go through the application to determine whether or not the student is suitable for the program, and if the program resources are suitable for meeting the student's needs. Students are usually referred to the program for issues like deteriorating attendance, anxiety from large class sizes, academic struggles. Students could have a need: to have fewer courses at a time to focus on, to have greater support to keep up in class, to have greater supervisory control on attendance, to have more regular day and night time habits to function well in school, to break connections with a particular group of friends, for a therapeutic setting, for an environment that provides life skills. After the referral is accepted, the student with a caregiver or a teacher attends an intake meeting to determine what the student's issues are, and how they might be managed in the program.

Mainstream core subjects are taught in a standard classroom style setup. Compared to the rest of the building, the classroom areas have few windows. Tables and chairs arranged in rows were the choice of seating and the teachers' desk was placed at the front of the room. There are friendly cats and dogs in the building, and students could be seen petting them, even while the students were in the classroom areas.

Although officially there are no separate modified courses, instruction is flexible and supportive, ensuring students attain their credits. School starts at 9 a.m. and dismisses at 2 p.m. It is a shorter school day than that of typical high schools. Apart from doing academic work, the students spend a portion of the school day doing work on the farm: caring for the land (landscaping, planting the garden), caring for the animals (alpacas, goats, sheep, pigs, ducks, chickens, cats, dogs), yard work (cutting grass, trimming trees, mending fences), caring for the house (painting) and doing wood crafts (building birdhouses).

Students are recommended to attend for two semesters; after this period they have a conversation with the principal about their next steps. Some students choose to stay longer while others return to a mainstream school.

Summary of programs.

Program A is designed for students who are in their final year of elementary school as organized in the city it is located in, and is designed to intervene and reduce the likelihood of the students dropping out of school. The students targeted are perceived to be experiencing some form of struggle—academic, conduct, or outside of school-related—that might put them at-risk for school failure; however, students who require intensive supports are not accepted. The students are expected to be independent and responsible enough to keep themselves and their classmates safe in circumstances when they are not being supervised. Program B is designed for students who are 18 to 21 years old and have not earned a credit in the past year or wish to return to school after dropping out while the province is still paying

for their schooling (the province pays for K to 12 schooling up to age 21). Program C is developed for high school-aged students who are experiencing struggles—academic, conduct, out of school-related—that are impacting their ability to function and be successful in their schooling. Program C completes the regular grade curriculum, Program B offers only modified credits, and the students graduate once they have earned all their credits. Modified credits can be used as a form of qualification for employment but will not qualify students for post-secondary education. To matriculate for post-secondary education, the students have to earn regular credits. Program C offers both regular and modified credits; however, the majority of the student population takes regular credits. Afterwards, the students return to mainstream secondary schools to complete their education.

Study Participants

Prior to the start of the study, I was not familiar with the educational landscape or the geographical area in which the research was conducted. Subsequent to identifying the topic area of research, my research supervisor and I observed two sites of interest. At the time of the ethical application, four teachers affiliated with these two sites indicated their interest to participate in the study. The four comprised three practising teachers in two programs, and one teacher who had created one of these two programs, but no longer taught in it. An additional program was added through a bulletin sent out by one of the school divisions via their communication channel, after the investigation had been approved in the division. This resulted in an additional teacher participant from a different program. During the first round of interviews, I indicated my interest to the founder of one of the programs to interview the co-founder, who had taught in the alternative program for a few years, but no longer worked with the program; as a result that teacher participant recruited his former colleague.

The six graduate participants were recruited by two of the teacher participants. Contact scripts (in Appendix E) were emailed to the teacher participants to be utilised in their

recruitment. All the participants recruited were over 18 years old, except for one school dropout who was a few months away from his 18th birthday. The consent form was signed by his mother, who attended the interview with the participant, reviewed and signed the transcript release form. In the recruitment of the graduates, one teacher participant arranged meetings between myself and three graduate participants, to talk to them at the alternative school; no contact information was exchanged. The same was done for the signing of the transcript release form. For the other three student participants, the recruiting teacher made contact with a number of graduates, got their permission, and forwarded their contact information on to me. These graduates were contacted via email and phone, using the contact script in appendix E. Multiple graduates agreed to participate when contacted, but in the end, only three followed through and met for the interview. Thus, in total, there were six graduates (three from Program A and three from Program B) and six teacher participants, for a total of twelve participants.

All contact with participants was only in regard to the phenomenon under investigation. All participants were recruited based on their affiliation and participation in one of the three programs. No participant was included or excluded based on culture, language, religion, race, mental or physical disability, sexual orientation, ethnicity, gender or age. More than one of the graduate participants were of Indigenous descent; however, their ethnicity only became known to the investigator at the time of the interview. Their participation in the interview was centred on their success in the alternative education program and not their indigeneity.

There were no graduate participants interviewed from one of the programs, as the information to make contact was not available. Not having graduate participants from one of the programs may give cause to characterize the study as imbalanced research; however, the

constructivist grounded theory method focuses on the individual account of the situation under study, and not necessarily a collective definition of the situation (Charmaz, 2006).

Table 1

Number of Participants in the Study

Program	Brief Description	Teacher Participants	Teacher: Pupil Ratio	Student Participants
A	Full year, all subject areas, Grade 8 students	4 [T1, T2, T3, T4]	1:14 2 teachers to 28 students	3 all graduated from the program [G1, G2, G3]
B	Adult 12 program-at least 18 years old and have not earned a credit in the last year when starting the program	1 [T5]	1:10 or less 1 teacher and 1 educational assistant to approximately 10	3 all graduated from the program [G4, G5, G6]
C	Grade 9, 10 and 11 students who are referred to the program from their mainstream schools.	1 [T6]	1.6 :18 18 students 1 teacher 1.6 teachers, principal, and 1 office administrator	0 participants

Data Collection

Procedure followed.

Ethical considerations.

Ethical approval was sought from the University of Saskatchewan Behavioural Research Ethics Board (Beh-REB). Following the university's ethical approval, applications were made to the two school divisions' research committees which the alternative programs

are a part of. While waiting for the ethics applications to be reviewed by the school divisions, one of the teacher participants, who was at the time on-leave from his school division, was interviewed. After receiving the approvals from the school divisions, meeting dates and times were set up with teacher participants.

During the meetings with the teacher participants, I informed them of my interest to interview former students of the program who were 18 years old or older. Only one teacher had connections with graduates who were 18 or older. I emailed the contact script, along with the contact information for the study which can be seen in appendix D, to the teacher. The teacher then contacted the graduates, and then emailed a list of graduates who indicated their interest to participate in the study to me. I sent an email (appendix E) to all six graduates, and three responded; however, only one interview materialized from this list. A meeting date was set up and the interview was conducted on campus of the university. A couple months later, another list of graduates was received, the same procedure followed, except two had to be contacted by phone; an additional two graduate participants were recruited. Individual meetings were arranged at a food court and a coffee shop, and both interviews were conducted successfully, making a total of three participants for that program.

The research recruitment protocols of the second school division required the recruitment notice to be made available to all teachers in the school division. A recruitment letter was sent to the school division offices (Appendix C), from which a bulletin was drafted and sent out to the teachers in the division. The bulletin produced an additional program and one teacher. Separate meeting dates were set up with the two teachers from the division at their program locations. The teachers of these two programs were not permitted to provide graduates' contact information; however, the students in one of the programs were 18 years or older, and at the end of their program, a recruitment letter was sent to the teacher by way of email (Appendix D), and three of the students agreed to be interviewed for the study. The

teacher arranged meetings between the student researcher and the students at the school. They were met and interviewed individually.

Observations.

Observations were done in all three programs prior to and during data collection. The observations included observing teaching exercises (Programs A, and B), and the physical environment of the classroom or school (all Programs). Field notes were made during the observations, some of which were used as point of interest in the interviews and for data inquiry. All three programs were visited at least twice.

Interviews.

Qualitative semi-structured interviews were done with all twelve participants. The participants were asked mostly open-ended questions to get their views and opinions (Cresswell, 2014). The interviews with the participants were semi-structured and face-to-face. Before the start of the interviews, the participants were given a copy of the consent form, which the investigator read through, then gave participants a moment to read for themselves and ask questions. Upon the signing of the consent form, a copy was given to each participant. The procedure for graduates and teachers was the same. Even though an interview guide was used at the start of each interview, the interviews were allowed to progress with the interest level of the participants' narratives; for example, participants were encouraged to expound when an unexpected revelation was made. The interviews were recorded, logged, and assigned titles, numbers, and dates.

I tape recorded and transcribed all thirteen interviews. One teacher participant was interviewed twice; therefore, thirteen interviews were done. Interviews were scheduled based on participants' availability; the time between some interviews allowed for initial coding before the next interview. In a number of the cases, it was challenging to arrange a meeting date and time that was convenient for both the participant and myself. Considering the

challenges of arranging the first interview in each case, the likelihood of arranging a second interview was considered minimal, so efforts were made to gather all necessary rich data in the first interview. The emerging concepts in former interviews were noted and queried in later interviews of subsequent participants, modifying and adding more questions to the interviews (Charmaz, 2014) where applicable. For a few of the teacher participants, clarifying questions were emailed or asked on subsequent visits. All six teacher participants reviewed and signed their transcript release forms.

For the purpose of recording notes about my feelings and notions about the data, the research processes or concerns elicited in the interview, I kept a research journal. The journal notes included concepts or actions of interest that emerged or were observed while conducting interviews, comparing data, or visiting the programs. These entries were logged and dated.

Data Analysis

Delaying the review of literature, a debated perspective in foundational grounded theory, to minimize the occurrences of researchers imposing their thoughts, feelings and conceptual understanding on the research process is not considered necessary in constructivist grounded theory. In the practice of constructivist grounded theory, a literature review prior to data collection is considered necessary on the assumption previously mentioned “reality is multiple, processual, and constructed [under conditions]” (Charmaz, 2014, p.13). Fundamentally, the conditions under which a specific research is constructed will influence the reality and the process.

The analysis process proved that the literature reviewed prior to the start of this study was not complete. During the analysis of the data new understanding emerged that required review of additional literature and withdrawal of literature previously reviewed to support deeper analysis and the need for conceptual understanding in the process. The emergence of

the concept of caring became prominent during analysis, and now forms part of the literature in chapter 2; hence, the inclusion of the works of Nel Noddings, a renowned theorist on the concept, and others. Literature on relationships and learning environment and symbolic interactionism were also added to support analysis and emerging concepts.

Coding in constructivist grounded theory forms the framework of the analysis; the researcher engages in coding the data in at least two ways—initial coding, which involves naming lines or segments of data, and focused coding, which involves merging, categorizing and organizing noteworthy or, recurring, initial codes (Charmaz, 2014).

Initial coding

The transcripts were placed in the Nvivo data management software and initially coded. Lines or related chunks of data were named and saved as nodes based on what was being inferred from the data. In the teachers' descriptions, the data were mainly named in terms of the influence of their work on the students' needs. In the students' descriptions, naming the data was focused on how the students benefitted from the conditions that had been created in the program, how the students felt about the conditions in the programs as well as their historical background in and outside of school. Naming the data was also influenced by my prior knowledge on pedagogy, for example, naming teaching and learning strategies such as scaffolding and differentiating. I could identify those in conversation, and knew they held potential to be raised to a subcategory or category. Data that show characteristics of emerging categories were promoted during initial coding (Saldaña, 2013). These early categories or subcategories were being added to while initially coding. All the NVivo codes were placed in one of two categories: teacher participant or graduate participant.

Focused coding

This is the second round of coding in which the initial codes were sorted into categories and sub-categories for both sets of participants; nodes are amalgamated based on the relations between them, and their frequency (Saldaña, 2013). I perused the practices and perspectives of the teachers across programs, and identified commonalities in their descriptions. Many categories and subcategories emerged from this coding but were mainly reflective of the teachers. I revisited the graduate participants' codes, and realized instruction, relationships, the physical and affective environments held meaning for them in the alternative education programs. Comparing data to data, I used the graduate participants claims to crystallize the significance of the conditions (Charmaz, 2014) the teachers described.

All the significant data gathered were organized under three themes: instruction, physical/affective environment, and relationships. Even so, the data organization was deficient in one important element of constructivist grounded theory: process. Processes have points of commencement and culmination (Charmaz, 2014). I was seeking to identify a process that connects the three themes, but I was not able to construct one. Then, I decided to examine the themes individually for an internal process. Since student-teacher relationships were emphasized as necessary across the programs, I started with that theme. While examining phrases and statements such as “relationships must be first” “you have to know them as people before you know them as students and they have to know me as a person before they know me as a teacher” “they get to see you as a human being” “It wasn't just an application process for them, it was an application process for us” I found it necessary to take a closer look at the statement “*We were going to act in a caring relationship.*” The term caring relationships initiated thoughts about Nel Noddings (1984) care theory, which I had read about in one of my graduate courses. After making that connection with care theory, I

researched and examined the process that underlies care theory, and how it aligned with the data from the three programs.

Validity

Accuracy started with the data. The participants were all given opportunities to review and to modify their interview transcripts, to ensure their meaning had truly been captured. At that point, they signed off on their interview transcripts. To ensure validity, rich descriptions of the conditions and settings were given to provide readers with a vivid picture (Cresswell, 2014). Triangulation was achieved with the numerous memos, fieldnotes, and interview scripts, the use of symbolic interactionism to delineate processes and ways of knowing, to validate findings and application of extant theory.

Reliability

Reliability requires some measure of generalization, an act that defies the fundamental goals of qualitative research, which are context dependent and case specific inquiries; therefore, it is approached with prudence and rarely used (Cresswell, 2014). Instead, transferability is recommended as most appropriate for qualitative research. The qualitative method recognizes that data interpretation is key to the research analysis (Cresswell, 2014). Researchers using constructivist grounded theory play the role of interpretivist in the data analysis process. According to Greene (2010) interpretivist knowledge does not support experiential generalizations; therefore, transferability requires the researcher to adequately delineate the context of the study, so that readers can effectively determine whether the concepts can be adopted and used in the context of their work. To ensure transferability in this research, a rich accurate description of the procedures and findings was included.

Summary

The aim of this chapter was to explain the choice of research methodology and its suitability to inquire into the research questions. Further, the chapter detailed the Programs and information about numbers of teacher and graduate participants. The process for data collection was outlined, as well as the process for analyzing the data, were presented. The description of the participants and the intricacies of the procedures and the precautionary measures provides a detailed view of the way the study was conceptualized and carried out. The participants' perspectives gave life to the resulting concepts which are outlined in the analysis chapter below.

CHAPTER 4: ANALYSIS

Introduction

Central to the concept of constructivist grounded theory is the perusal of processes (Charmaz, 2014). In the analysis of the data, the conditions created in the alternative programs to achieve success with the students were explored with constructivist grounded theory principles. That is, the data collected from the six teacher participants who are teaching or have taught students in one of the three alternative education programs studied (named within this thesis as Programs A, B, and C) and the six graduate participants from programs A and B, comprising three from each. All six graduate participants completed their alternative programs, and were either out of school, or enrolled in mainstream schools.

Caring relationships, learning (affective and physical) environment, and instructional style were prominent in both teacher and student participants' descriptions of their experiences. The symbolic interactionist perspective as an epistemological device was used to inquire into their experiences. This perspective defines the participants as interacting social subjects who define each other's actions in relation to the meanings they construct within the interactions.

In the following analysis of the observations (from field notes), interview transcripts, and memos, I use codes to refer to the teachers, the graduates, and the interviews. The teachers are referred to with T. The first four, T1, T2, T3, T4, are from Program A. T5 is from Program B, and T6 is from Program C. The citation after each quotation includes the teacher number, and the program letter, and the number (from the total of interviews with all participants) of the interview, and the date of the interview (T1-PA-Int#1, September 2018). Graduates are labelled with a G, and there are 6 of them. Each is followed with the Program (P) letter assignment (either A, B, or C), the interview #, and the date (G6-PB-Int#13, November 2018).

Caring Relationships

Conditions for a caring relationship.

All teacher participants cited student-teacher relationships as significant to the process of achieving success with their students. The relationships were formed through both planned and spontaneous interactions. In the initial interactions, the teachers communicated to the students through gestures and actions how they would conduct themselves as caring agents in the relationships. In the excerpt below, T1, a former teacher of Program A, gives an example of what usually transpires:

We told them that we were going to care about them, and we were going to act like we care. We weren't just going to say we care. We were going to act like we care. We were going to act in a caring relationship. (T1- PA-Int#1, September 2018)

In Program A, the teachers started building relationships with their students in the pre-Program Activities, while advertising the program to Grade Seven students in their mainstream schools, and in the two day long application camp. During the application camp, teachers began building relationships through participating in games and activities with the students and interacting with the students on a personal level. These personal interactions continued throughout the program. Teachers believed interacting with students on a personal level created opportunities for everyone involved to see each other as persons.

The teachers of programs B and C begin the process of building relationships with their students after the students start in their respective programs. For example, T6 of Program C said the entire staff at Program C is conversation oriented; whenever an opportunity arises, whether while doing chores on the farm or in other interactions, the teachers engage the students in conversation. Similarly, T5 of Program B articulated that it is a daily routine for him and his teaching assistant to engage their students in conversation when they arrive at school or during the course of the day to find out how they are doing or

what is going on in their lives. T5 and his teaching assistant use these conversations to show interest in the students' well-being and their lives, with T5 saying this is imperative for the start of their day. T5 supports and practices the concept of students and teachers meeting one another as persons first, which denotes two-way receptivity between students and teachers.

Two-way receptivity is actions of students and teachers that indicate their acceptance of each other in a caring student-teacher relationship. The teachers' and students' acceptance of each other in a relationship was located in teachers showing interest in and supporting their students to improve their situations, and the students demonstrating they appreciate these gestures to improve their situations. The students' receptivity was supported by the interactions that allowed them to see their teachers as persons, the teachers acknowledging them as persons before seeing them in the role of a student, and gaining an understanding of what the teachers and the program will do for them. To illustrate two-way receptivity, in Program A, the students were explicitly told the application process was not just for them, it was also for the teachers, as indicated in the excerpt below:

They got to know us, and we point blank said, it wasn't just an application process for them; it was an application process for us. Maybe they don't like us, maybe we go out there for two days and one night, and they go 'this is what we're going to do, I don't want to do this'. Absolutely. And we said you're not going to hurt our feelings if you come up to us and say don't pick me. I don't like this. (T1-PA-Int#1, September 2018)

During the June application camp, teachers communicated to the students that they were conscientious, and their choices would be respected. Students were able to see first-hand how the teachers would behave in the relationship with them gaining insight on how their prospective teachers might operate in their upcoming grade. They had the opportunity to choose whether being a member of that class could be the start of an authentic relationship. Thus, before the students began the program in the fall, the students would have accepted the

teachers. Choosing the program and then not accepting who the teacher is as a person would mean an authentic caring relationship could not develop; such relations would limit the possibility of teachers and students interacting and defining each other's actions. Caring is relational, and relationships develop from engaging in multiple interactions. For a consensus to exist between student and teacher, there has to be shared communication. Without shared communication, meanings are assigned (often inappropriately) to the actions and language of others in the relationship (Blumer, 1986). Assigning meanings to the acts of the individuals in the relationship dictates subsequent actions.

Why is students' receptivity important? Students at-risk become at-risk as a result of negative experiences and/or the deficits of the social institutions that should protect them. The effects of these negative experiences and institutional deficits can become permanent fixtures in the way students perceive and act towards others; thus, negative experiences can shape their conduct. Symbolic interactionists assume that human conduct influences how identities and circumstances are formed. In that regard, it can be difficult for teachers to influence behaviour constructed from negative experiences. According to Blumer (1986), social reality is difficult to circumvent and is uncompromising towards change. To elicit a favourable response from students, the teachers symbolized to the students verbally and through their actions that they value the relationships and the experiences the alternative programs will have for them.

As was outlined in chapter two, caring demands interaction between the student and the teacher. In their interaction, they get to know each other. Getting to know each other informs how they conduct themselves in relation to the other in subsequent interactions. Below, I will outline how the teachers and students in this study achieved receptivity and its importance in a caring relationship.

Getting to know each other as persons.

As an outsider to the worlds of at-risk students, teachers may find it difficult to break the barrier that separates their worlds from the students' worlds, and therefore find it difficult to elicit actions that demonstrate willingness to work with the students to transform their situation. In the excerpt below, T4 speaks about the nature of at-risk students and how students might respond to individuals they conceive as outsiders to their worlds:

They're choosing to come into our program, choosing to apply, choosing to do, is a new adventure; for our at-risk kids, that's scary. They have a lot more to lose, and they protect themselves a lot more strongly. If they don't know you, they don't even look at the program. They go, "you're too foreign. I need to be safe, and I'm safe with my friends, I'm safe with my community that I'm in already". (T4-PA-Int#4, November 2018)

From T4's perspective, at-risk students do not readily accept unfamiliar people in their lives. For at-risk students, safety and protection are with the social groups they are a part of, and they are not readily open to change. Strauss (1978) in his paper discussing the value of studying social worlds to deduce the process of transformation cited Tomastu Shibutani (1955)'s four basic aspects of social worlds as a "universe of regularized mutual response. Each is in an arena which there is a kind of organization. Also each is a cultural area, its boundaries being set neither by territory nor formal membership, but by the limits of effective communication" (p. 119). Students would have been accustomed to a particular way of interpreting and communicating acts (regularized response) in their worlds (cultural area), and these differ from what exists in their teachers' worlds. Therefore, teachers developing an understanding of the students' worlds supports their abilities to construct an authentic perception of what these students value: the beliefs and practices that shape their conduct. Teachers gaining knowledge of the beliefs and practices that shape at-risk students' conduct

is supported when teachers get to know their students as persons (constructing the limits of effective communication).

In addition to the preprogram activities (the June application camp) mentioned above, Program A teachers engage the students in low-pressure and fun activities for the first six weeks of school. T3 contends that the building up of positive relations in these activities is foundational to everything else. She said building relationships with her students before delving into matters of schooling *doesn't feel like school*; in fact, it earns her credibility as a person of influence and makes it easier to encourage students in the efforts to meet the demands of schooling. T1 from Program A defined the practice as a way of building up his account with his students, making deposits of positive relations. He was defining himself to the students as a person who has an interest in them. T2 endorsed the practice; he believes teachers who engage with their students in non-academic activities reveal their human side of making mistakes and learning from them.

T1 described a scenario in which he impulsively behaved out of character and yelled at a student who was involved in a serious matter and was about to storm out of the school. Unexpectedly, the student complied and did not react to the fact that he had yelled at her. T1 attributed the student's unexpected response to the work he had done building up positive relations with the student. He said it is a withdrawal from the account of positive relations he had built up with the student in the previous month. His bank account of positive relations with the student, having made several deposits as a caring person, apparently was sufficient to cover his withdrawal when he yelled at her.

T5's (Program B) main way of getting to know his students was not structured into a specific time nor was it restricted by the demands of schooling. He showed interest in the issues the students were grappling with in their out-of-school worlds through conversations. In these conversations, T5 said the students did not talk about school, or the things they

struggled with in school; he said, “*We talked about our lives.*” The conversation was not just about the students; he also shared his life stories, his personal experiences and struggles. If necessary, whenever conversations arose in class in which a discussion could benefit the students, he put aside the demands of schooling to allow them to share their stories and views on the matter.

T5’s self-disclosure about his life removed the teacher role and allowed students to see him as an individual, just another human being who makes mistakes as they do. It helped to dismantle the socialization that teach students to perceive their teachers as perfect beings who do not make mistakes and therefore of expecting them to be perfect. Noddings argued (1988) that caring is the conveyance of oneself to another, conveying one imperfect self to another. The self, according to Mead (1934), is extrinsically shaped through interacting and involvement with others. Students learning about their teachers’ experiences can help to shape how they act towards themselves and how they perceive their teachers. In the excerpt below G6 shares his interpretation of his teachers’ tendencies to share information about their lives:

They like to discuss stuff with you. Though, they'll talk about themselves as well. Like, what they used to do or what not. Something in their life or whatever. They actually care, you know. (G6-PB-Int#13, November 2018)

G6 appreciated the teacher’s self-disclosure; he interpreted the act as caring. His teacher cared in that he was willing to share details about his life outside of the classroom. Hult (1979) supported the idea of teachers interacting with their students on the person-to-person level; he deemed it a necessity for pedagogical caring. Noddings (1984) described caring as a relational practice between the carer and the receiver of the care. The sharing of experiences between T5 and his students is a demonstration of active interaction between a carer and the cared for.

In contrast, in Program C, students are allowed to settle into the therapeutic environment with the nurturing of the teachers and the staff. Some students are conversational, and others are not when they start the program. Students who are non-conversational are not coerced to engage in conversation; they are allowed to just be until they independently open up and begin to interact. T6 defined the practice as allowing the students to come to the realization that being in that program is not the same as the mainstream classroom that pressures them into being who they are not. According to Blumer (1986), a delay in an actor's participation suggests he is evaluating or formulating his actions towards the object. Students who delay participating in conversation are not treated with indifference; they are treated with care and warmth until they have formulated their actions to respond to the situation through conversation.

Teacher's receptivity.

At-risk students' worlds are varied and complex, and their worlds shape how they interpret, communicate, and conduct themselves. Understanding the nature of the students' complex worlds and their worlds' impacts on them as persons can be far-reaching for teachers who acquire that knowledge in a caring relationship with the students. A few of the teacher participants have demonstrated that the prior knowledge they acquired about their students' worlds enabled them to develop sensitivity towards their students' situations as well as formulating a perspective on how their own worlds compare to that of their students.

Prepared to understand.

All teacher participants had prior experiences with individuals who were deemed at-risk, in work or non-work situations, and believed those experiences influenced how they perceived at-risk students, and their decision to work with at-risk students. T4 had experience working with students of contrastingly different home backgrounds—prior to teaching in Program A, she worked with students who were from economically and familially-sound

contexts; in Program A, many of the students were from high-risk households. She compared the insights she gained, and concluded that students who live in high-risk households have different starting points in school from the students she had taught from the well-supported backgrounds.

Having grown up in well-supported households, T4 referred to the quality of life she and her partner teacher experienced in their upbringing as privileged and she was deeply moved by the academic and the skill gains the at-risk students from high-risk households are able to recover in the one year they spend in Program A, despite being in a disadvantaged position. In relation to Noddings' (1984) ethics of care, the carer is expected to develop a dual perspective of the caring relation, from the vantage point of both carer, and cared for, which is what is being demonstrated by T4. Without a dual perspective of the situation, the carer will be perceiving the cared-for from an abstract perspective, which is in opposition to caring as a relational act.

In addition, T4, as a child, had had experiences in the community of an ethnic group that experience many challenges and have a high representation among at-risk students in the education system; she had been able to participate in cultural festivities for this group. The experience informed her educational practice with at-risk students from that ethnicity. She said, through the experiences, she had the opportunity to learn the underlying meanings of certain cues and gestures, how to be receptive to the at-risk students' needs, and how to be culturally relevant in her practice. Being culturally informed and understanding how needs are communicated in a world outside of her own supported her ability to attach meanings to the students' language and actions of that ethnic group and construct actions that resonated with the students.

Similarly, T2's high school experience influenced how he perceived students at-risk. The student population of the high school he attended had a high representation of students

who were considered at-risk. From the experience, he recognized the privilege he had—having his basic needs adequately met—compared to his schoolmates who lived in households that were impoverished and struggling to provide basic needs such as food. Interacting with students who were at-risk during his high school years and working with at-risk populations after graduating high school, T2 constructed a perspective of at-risk students and how he might act towards them—seeing them as people first and not their situation, thinking of their situation as not deterministic of their outcome, but rather believing that they just needed extra support to achieve the quality of life that advantaged people can much more easily attain.

T5's high school experience as a student and as a teacher influenced his perspective of at-risk students. As a secondary teacher, he took all the students into his class that other teachers did not want anything to do with because he understood their conduct and what they needed to function. One recollection from his observation of at-risk students in high school is their tendency to intentionally engage in misconduct to evoke a dismissive reaction from their teacher and be subsequently removed. He said their misconduct is an externalization of their feelings related to their imposition in school and the other issues they are grappling with in their lives. In the excerpt below, he shares a story about his first encounter with a student who had been removed from more than one high school:

The first time I met him, I said so what do you want to do? Do you want to graduate?
[He answered:] "I just want to get an AK 47, I want to go to the Middle East, and I just want to be a freedom fighter." But I watched him when he said it, and if you watch young people closely, especially guys like him, he's got this little smirk on the side of his mouth, and he's got this little whatever, so he is testing me. He's just said it to get a reaction. "Oh really, You know you have to graduate from high school or else you have to be 18 years of age to join the army", right...I say, "tell you what, you are

not eighteen yet, are you? No. And you haven't graduated high school, have you? Tell you what. Why don't you show up tomorrow, come to Program B, we'll start on that path, and when you turn 18 if you want to join the army and go through all that stuff, all the training stuff and become a member of the Canadian armed forces, great, but you might change your mind once you see that there's a lot of options out there for you. You just show up tomorrow", and he did. I hear all kinds of horror stories about this guy. He's been in there [the Program] for two years; he's made lots of friendships, and lots of relationships. Now, he has one credit left to get to graduate, and finally last week – I'm really looking forward to Grad. (T5-PB-Int#5, January 2019)

While reviewing the transcripts, I found evidence in G6's interview that connected him to the encounter described by T5. In his interview, G6 spoke about his upper elementary mainstream school experience, saying he often felt apathetic about school, and was struggling with issues at home. He did not believe his teachers cared about him because they did not show an interest in what he was going through at home. With these feelings and his lack of interest in the learning material, he said he wanted to travel and become a freedom fighter to help others. Upon hearing his pronouncement of wanting to become a freedom fighter, some teachers would have probably reacted and perceived the situation as beyond their capabilities, but T5 was unperturbed by his words. T5, unlike G6's prior teachers, chose to speak on a topic that he felt had meaning for G6 and changed his focus. He pointed out the legitimate options available to him, and the actions they could take together to increase his chances of graduating. Although T5 had heard horror stories from other teachers about G6, he did not use them to determine his actions towards G6. With that approach, he was able to permeate the unfavourable perspective G6 had constructed about teachers from his elementary school

experience. T5 deconstructed G6's conduct and communicated that he was attuned to his needs. G6's need was to be successful enough in school to graduate.

Both T6 and T1 admitted that making the choice to work with at-risk students was influenced by their experiences with an at-risk population. T1 said he decided that at-risk students were going to be his speciality after working in an inner-city school where he saw how the students, the school, and he himself benefitted from the practices he used to achieve success with the students. T6 stated that her first teaching job was with at-risk students and she has continued her career working with at-risk populations since then.

Likewise, T3 had experiences in two organizations that gave her a view into what it is like in the worlds of individuals living in adverse circumstances. She said the experience influenced how she might perceive inappropriate conduct in the classroom. Working in group homes taught her that a student's disruptive behaviour is not always representational of the real cause of the student's conduct; like T5, she espoused that underlying issues might be at the center of the student's disruptive conduct. However, T3 believed she needed education to support her practice with at-risk students. On that basis, she established relationships with individuals of the same cultural background of many of her at-risk students, engaging in cultural counselling, and has created a network of individuals that she communicates with when she needs support. Of all the teachers, T3 seemed to have the most limited prior experience with at-risk students, but the actions she took independently to improve her relations with the students shows she had a process for evaluating her actions and for developing a set of actions to improve, and that speaks to caring. She cared about her students enough to want to learn about their backgrounds and to build a network of individuals for support, who helped her to develop sensitivity, and provided cultural education on the students' backgrounds. The process that T3 created seems to be working well for her and

might be suitable for teachers who may not have experience or exposure that would give them a perspective on their students' worlds.

Tell them what you will do for them.

Teachers being upfront with students and letting them know what their program will do for them also plays a role in receptivity. Program A does so through their preprogram activities, both telling students what they will do for them, and demonstrating to some extent what the students will be experiencing. Both programs B and C have intake meetings with their incoming students. Program C's intake meeting takes place with the student, a guardian or teacher, and the school's personnel. In the meeting they will discuss what the student will do in the program, such as their academic work and chores they will do on the farm. For Program B, it is a one-on-one meeting with the class teacher and the incoming student (all the students are considered adults as they are over the age of 18). T5 of Program B asks the students to tell their stories, what caused them to be there. The purpose of this meeting and the questions asked are to understand what the students are bringing into the classroom, so T5 can figure out how he can use the resources he has at hand to help their situation. The approach not only informs students on what will be done for them in the program, but T5, through considering the students' circumstances, can figure out a course of action to take to improve their situations.

Students' receptivity.

Even though the teachers' prior experiences support their ability to understand the students, it is through their interactions with the students that they cultivate authentic relationships and develop understanding of what has meaning for the students. Meanings and receptivity vary among students because of the nature of individual students and what they are seeking. The meanings and the support students seek influences how receptive they are and when they are receptive. Receptivity is not locked to a particular pattern; some students

immediately show receptivity through their actions and language, whilst others are delayed in their receptivity. In the statement below G1 talks about being receptive when she realized what the Program could do for her situation:

They told us we would be independent; we would have independence. I was not independent living in [name of a place] like I was dependent on my stepdad and my mom for whatever. I just didn't want to do that [remain dependent] because I didn't really like hanging out with them very much. I wanted to get some more space and do things on my own. That's what the program helped me do. I knew that they [the teachers] could help me like right away because they explained that to me right away that we would have all this freedom with our bus passes. (G1—PA—Int#4, November 2018)

Learning that she would have autonomy instantly resonated with an object of value in G1's world. She needed support to develop independence and that had the most meaning for G1 in her situation. She found her meaning and was ready for the change.

Some students advocated to be selected for Program A after seeing what the program could do for them. T1 said some of these students [who advocated for themselves] were bullies who believed the program offerings were what they needed to transform their conduct. G5 also acted independently approaching his principal and asking to be a part of Program B while attending high school in the same building where Program B operates where he was failing in his academic work. He wanted out of the context where he was failing at academics. He took the initiative to inquire about the program's offerings and decided that the program was a fit for him. G5 said he saw the program structure could relieve the struggle of doing multiple courses daily. In program B, only one course is taken at a time, and most courses are completed in twenty days.

Although there were no graduate participants from Program C in the study, T6 stated that she had students in the intake meetings who point blank said they were finished with their mainstream school and were ready for a fresh start after learning what the program had to offer them. Her interpretation of their tone of language and observed mannerisms was that the students were anticipating a relief from their mainstream school situations. These students were able to visualize the changes that participating in the Program could bring about. Students who were instantly sold on a particular program reassessed their situations and saw where they could improve if given a new start. Individuals constructed actions to things upon seeing what the program was capable of doing for them (Blumer, 1986). Constructing actions in response to the teachers' gestures indicated the particular program could improve a condition or value; this indicated reception to the teacher in a caring relationship.

Delayed response to a caring relationship.

While some students were eager and ready to embrace change, others were taciturn and took a while longer to display actions or cues to communicate their willingness to be involved in the situation. In the scenario below, T1 shared an experience with a student who took longer than usual to interact and display actions that affirmed her interest in the program:

I still remember one year we had a very shy introverted young lady who kept her hood up the whole time and barely participated. Barely participated in the activities... Literally by the end of September, her hood came off. It was like this almost ceremonial moment when she finally felt comfortable enough with the class. Because again with street kids you know that hood and hat, that's their turtle shelter... This young lady has to feel comfortable enough to take her hood off. We just immersed them in that, and the immersion was it. (T1—PA—Int#1, September 2018)

This student came close to not being selected for the program. T1 said initially that he had written her off; he interpreted her non-participation in the application camp as an indication that she did not need the program. It was in final moments of the application camp she initiated conversation with T1's partner teacher and let her know that she needed the program. Presumably, the student observed the activities that were taking place at the camp, internalized what she saw, concluded that the program could benefit her and felt compelled to act—moving out of her comfort zone and advocating for herself at the last minute. After entering the program she maintained her taciturn disposition, but the teachers kept her immersed in the class activities to maintain the group and their projects. Many teachers in mainstream schools would not tolerate a student wearing a hood in their class until the student felt comfortable enough to remove it. Teachers who are inflexible and ardently enforce school rules would interpret her actions as an act of defiance to the school rules. The teachers of Program A exercised flexibility, recognizing that her hood held meaning for her, and was not an act of defiance. T1 referred to the hood as an object of protection for her. Objects have unique meanings to different individuals; when necessary, exceptions to school rules have to be made so as to allow students' idiosyncrasies towards achieving, ultimately, the desired conduct.

A similar approach is used in Program C, where students who delay to socially interact in the learning environment are left alone until they feel comfortable enough to participate. Students who delay their response to the care and program offerings will eventually choose to interact on their own, based on what they observe and experience, concluding they are accepted the way they are. Meanings are not only communicated through interaction; they are also symbolized through gestures and attitudes. Showing up for the program is also affirmation that the student wants to be there.

Cannot be supported.

Students who show through attitude and language their receptiveness to the teachers' gestures and the program offerings sometimes fail to do their part in the caring relationship. Their subsequent display of poor conduct that is beyond the teacher's capabilities to supervise and manage, and threaten the whole group, strains caring relationships. In Program A, the students are involved in activities that require them to act independently and keep themselves and their classmates safe. Students who cannot stay within those safe-conduct boundaries strain the relationship with the teachers and create a risk for themselves and the other students. T4 said in the first year of Program A, they had a student whose conduct required constant monitoring to keep the student safe and it created hardships in their ability to function. She found the experience tiring and requiring much sacrifice. T4 interpreted the decision to admit students who need excessive supervision to keep themselves safe as a mistake, a mistake by means of not being equipped to handle at-risk students with such high-risk conduct. T2 said in their present selection process, they aim to select the students who display responsible and independent conduct at the application camp.

T6, from Program C, admitted that their selection process sometimes means students are accepted whose conduct is beyond the resources of the program to accommodate. For example, they have had students experiencing withdrawal symptoms from their drug use. In that state, students are not able to control their conduct. She believed an in-house counsellor is a necessary additional resource that could reinforce the program's ability to handle some types of conduct. On the other hand, for Program B, there are little to no criteria that exclude potential students from participating in the program. Although all programs have low teacher: pupil ratios, in comparison to programs C (1:11) and A (1:14), Program B has an even lower teacher: pupil ratio (approximately 1:10), and has access to additional resource personnel on and off campus for students who may require additional support. For example, Program B has

a full time educational assistant, access to a full-time school counsellor and school-home liaison officer in their building, and the counsellor comes in to do formalized counselling, and students can be fast-tracked to a treatment facility and child psychologist. Students accepting the programs' offerings and being in a caring relationship does not mean they will succeed. Students still have to be prepared to define their conduct in the caring relation to achieve their goals or at least get themselves into a state to do so. For students in the different programs, defining their conduct is not about displaying impeccable conduct; it is about showing willingness to do their share of the work as indicated by T1 in the excerpt below:

It was all about relationships. It was about working together with others. It wasn't about being perfect. It was about you being willing to do your share of the work: help out, cooperate with others. (T1-PA-Int.#1, Sept 2018)

Essentially T1 was saying that everyone involved influences the situation. Students have to do their part to maintain the caring relationship. Students who try to get off property at Program C are told twice to desist and if the student does not comply the student actions are interpreted as not doing their part to maintain the caring relationship. T6 said students who behave that way are driven home and dismissed because the student's conduct puts their own safety at-risk. When students cannot be supported there is no consensus between the carer's and the cared-for's actions, resulting in a shift in interpretation. In T6's situation, she perceived the student's lack of compliance as consequential; therefore, the effort to form a caring relationship had to be terminated. Reception from both parties in the caring relation is necessary; consequential actions that threaten the safety of themselves and others warranted the end of the teachers' attempts to create a caring relationship.

Trust earned.

The caring relationship is foundational to everything the teachers want to achieve with their at-risk students, and from that caring relationship trust develops. It may take multiple

demonstrations to convince the student, but when teachers of at-risk students earn their students' trust it makes a difference. T5 said, when he earned his students' trust, they formed an attachment, and he was able to steer them in the right direction. G1 developed trust in her teacher from observing how he conducted himself in his daily activities. Implicitly, trust is necessary and a fragile attribute; however, it can be withdrawn if the actions of the individual entrusted contradict the original expectation, as revealed by G1:

I'm pretty sure he was like trust isn't something that just happens. It's gained, so I think it was like small acts like along the way. I am pretty sure it was small things that happen every single day. Like it wasn't one major thing that made me say I trust my teachers or I respect my teachers...I remember having teachers that I would share things with, and I would hear it from another teacher, come up to me and be like, so I heard this, and I'm like [sigh]. (G1—PA—Int#5, November 2018)

Here, G1 demonstrated how teachers not in the Program had betrayed his trust.

Trust has to be a part of the relationship with at-risk students. An untrusting relationship reinforces that door that needs to be unlocked for relationships that require personalized attention. Teachers who gain students' trust have a greater opportunity in getting students to respond and recognize their efforts to care. Without receptivity, acceptance is denied. Students will choose to remain in the realm they are most comfortable in. That comfortable realm is within their familiar spaces, with familiar people. Impressing on at-risk students that they must go beyond their comfort zone requires a display of personalized interest in their situation and an intention to care, to make them want to risk doing the unfamiliar. Feeling comfortable enough to do the unfamiliar is described by G1 as feeling safe, feeling at home, and having a frame of mind that makes you feel you can do anything.

Teachers showing care.

Noddings (1988) likens authentic caring to the natural tendency of a mother caring for her child; a model that can be impractical on the grounds of appropriateness in some situations, but tenable when conceptualized as acts of care beyond the bounds of duty for the well-being of an individual. The teacher participants displayed attitudes and acts of care toward their students that are indicative of natural care, seemingly not pedagogically driven but addressing the well-being of students.

At the start of every day the teachers in Program B communicate authentic care to the students who show up for school as well as the ones who did not. Upon entering the classroom, the students are greeted and engaged in short conversations about how they are doing, with T5 saying, for example, “how are you doing? Did you sleep last night?” and when they are leaving, he would bid them goodbye saying “have a great evening, see you tomorrow.” T5 conveyed to his students that they are accepted, and their presence was valued. As well, when students did not show up for school without giving notice, they are called 10 minutes after the expected arrival time to check on their well-being. In the excerpt below T5 gave an example of what usually transpires in the conversation:

Sometimes it's an environment where people care about you, where when you don't show up for school at 9 o'clock and 10 after 9:00 somebody is calling your cell phone saying, where are you? Why aren't you here? How come you didn't call me? Because you're supposed to be here. 'But I was sick.' Did you call me and tell me you weren't going to come? No. Well, that's what people do in a relationship. (T5—PB—Int#6, January 2019)

The act and the content of the conversation should communicate to the students that their presence is important, they have a place in his classroom, such that their absence is noticed. They are not just another student in his class; he is attentive and conscientious. T5

also said sometimes it is not possible to complete checks with everyone when they enter, so they continue throughout the day. Recognition forms part of the daily interaction in Program B. Below, G4 shares her interpretation of effort in Program B, to recognize students daily:

G4: *He focuses on like the individual student. He checks on you every day.*

Interviewer: *How does he check on you?*

G4: *He asks you how you are and stuff.*

Interviewer: *How does it make you feel when he checks on you?*

G4: *It makes you feel like they care more than somebody that doesn't even recognize you when you come into the class. (G4—PB—Int#10, February 2019)*

G4 symbolizes the actions as recognizing and caring. In the interview, G4 said the problems she was having at home and school led to anxiety and depression. There were two instances in her interview where she mentioned or implied that recognition was lacking in her mainstream classes. Her teachers in Program B recognized and showed her care when she was struggling with her condition and allowed her to go for a walk. The attention G4 received from her teachers apparently has had a lasting impact. Program B's system for showing their students recognition also enabled them to perceive the students' emotional state.

For Program A, T4 believes having the ability to read the emotional state of the classroom and of individual students is an important skill for teachers to develop so they can take pre-emptive action to reduce or stop an unfavourable event from occurring. Reading emotional cues, T4 of Program A said, on entering the classroom, she and her colleagues could decipher when things were not quite right with a student or between students. They would observe the physical interactions and other individual mannerisms and draw on their knowledge about students' typical conduct and decipher that they were not quite themselves. They would either pull the student aside or ask the student that seemed odd to assist with a task or come along on an errand. A conversation would ensue, and based on the trust that had

been established, the student would share what was going on personally. The teachers could then adapt the planned activities to help the student to cope and not fall apart.

In Program C, T6 and her staff use observation and discrete conversations to identify students who come to school struggling and decide on pre-emptive actions to help students cope. The staff usually observed and greeted the students getting off the bus and coming into the building. T6 said within the span of five minutes they can tell who is okay, who is tired, among other things. The staff would then have side conversations about their observations. They would communicate the oddities they observed and figure out the course of action they will use to help the student to cope. The course of action in Program C meant making exceptions and adjustments where possible to get the student to a state of functionality, such as giving them an hour to catch up on some sleep because there were issues at home that prevented them from sleeping, or modifying the program so the student could complete an assignment and still be successful.

T2 said his approach to conceptualizing students who are conducting themselves is contrary to what is expected as a likely externalization of an issue in their lives; for example, the need for food or clothing. Making exceptions that enabled students to function in school in times of difficulty is another way the teachers helped students to survive. Exceptions, such as helping students with food are ways in which teachers helped students to feel secure. T5 said he always had healthy treats in his filing cabinets for students who were hungry. In addition, he would secure leftovers or excess food from the cafeteria and give it to students he knew were in need of food as well as advise them about the other places where they could receive assistance with food, as well as social assistance and treatment for mental health or addiction problems. In multiple ways teachers show care, helping students to survive their difficult circumstances.

Summary of caring relationships.

The initial interaction between at-risk students and their teachers are crucial in determining subsequent actions. The teachers have a greater role to play, eliciting receptivity from the students; proving that they will work for and with them, not against them, and take into account their needs some of which are beyond pedagogical undertakings and their individuality. Students, like teachers, need to show their receptivity through their actions in a caring relationship. The students' receptiveness behaviours are indicators from which teachers construct their subsequent actions in the daily development of relationships.

Affective Environment

Our emotions are entwined with our actions because we act on and react to emotions. Actions and emotions are connected; they flow from each other (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). In this section, I will analyse the conditions that are created to elicit actions that support a wholesome affective environment.

Conditions for affective environment.

Student-teacher relationships are foundational to everything else, but it is challenging for teachers to use a one-to-one approach to support all these relationships in regular classrooms, and, more so, in alternative education classrooms that cater for students who struggle academically, socially, emotionally or any combination of the three. These students see school as negative. They have not done well in at least one domain and are in need of a fresh start. Many at-risk students have had negative experiences in school already, so they are not pre-disposed to participate in school at all. They need to see school as different, creating a necessity for the programs to be different than the traditional classrooms they came from.

All students need affection; however, teachers showing affection to a sizeable group of students every day is a strain for teachers and they find themselves spread thin (Noddings, 1984). Being thinly spread to show affection to all students is even more difficult with a

group of high-risk students. I found in all three of these programs, teachers cultivated an affective environment that is supportive of students' emotional and social well-being, through using verbal and non-verbal communication, and planned activities to empower, and connect the students to support one another. A positive sense of self is an uncommon character trait with many at-risk students. In this section, I will examine the ideologies that underlie the teachers' work to give students a fresh start, teaching students how to handle failure, removing the traditional structures, and developing a sense of community.

Give students a fresh start.

To give students a fresh start in Program A is giving them a break from mainstream schooling ideologies and practices that defined them negatively or created barriers to their success. Below, T1 shares his view on how negative perceptions impact students:

We would give them a complete break from everything. A complete break from how teachers view them. The other thing too, if the kid stays out of school and the kid is marginalized, the kid has issues, the kid can't make it to school, the kid has attendance problems, the kid has behaviour problems, the kid has academic problems; they can never get away from that. I mean, sure they get a new teacher next year, but that new teacher has watched them. That new teacher has their own assumptions. That new teacher has heard nothing but horror stories in the staffroom from the previous teachers. It's very difficult. It takes a heck of a teacher to ignore all that. They view that kid through that lens. All their classmates view them through that lens. (T1—PA—Int#1, pt-1, September 2019)

At-risk students typically experience various forms of dysfunctions that influence how they relate to others both in and outside of school and may result in them engaging in maladaptive behaviours. Consequently, their peers, uninformed teachers, and other people in their lives may begin to define them through their maladaptive behaviours. Symbolic

interactionists presuppose identities are formed from human conduct. Individuals who observe or experience a particular at-risk student engaging in maladaptive conduct over time may begin to define that student's identity through the conduct they experienced or observed, and eventually label them as undesirable. Students who are singled out as undesirable by their peers and teachers face preconceptions each year because of these socially constructed identities. As T1 said "*it takes a heck of a teacher to ignore all of that*" [the negative stories other teachers tell about students]. The teachers who are not able to disregard the negative perceptions could continue to define the student through the identity the student portrayed the last year. Giving students a fresh start means not to resurrect the student's negative past, or define them by their past failures, shortcomings. It means changing the way these students experience school and their teachers.

A common way for teachers to learn about their students is to inquire about the student's school history, which is recorded in the students' cumulative record. In Program B the cumulative record is *not* examined, except for the transcripts to gain an understanding of the student's academic performance in preparation for instruction. T5 (Program B) said *he "may not do it the way a lot of people [teachers] do it"*, but he avoids "*looking in the cumulative folders*". He deliberately avoided examination of the students' cumulative records; thus exempting him from having any interaction with perspectives of the students' past school experiences scripted on the cumulative record. Presumably, he believed viewing the students' cumulative records could make him vulnerable to responding to what was written in the record and then perhaps perceiving the student through their past actions and/or the perspectives of the individuals who wrote on the record. In that regard the student would not be getting a fresh start. Many teachers may not agree with his approach of not looking into students' cumulative folders; especially, teachers who are of the belief that students' cumulative records support teachers' understanding of them.

T5 supports his understanding of his students by directly interacting with students in their first interaction with each other in the intake meeting. He prompts students to speak their truth asking them questions such as “*Why are you here? How bad is your drinking problem? Do you do drugs? How much? Do you smoke every day?*” For some people, the questions might seem intrusive, but he reassures the students that he is not digging for anything, he just wants to learn about their situation, and what he might be able to do to help. Rather than inquiring into the students’ histories to discover what they need from the perspectives of another individual who might have disregarded the student’s tribulations, he allows his students to speak their truth. Allowing students to speak their truth reveals the need the student has as a person. Through the conversation, the teacher should be able to uncover the student’s experiences and develop an understanding of their needs.

T5 is conversant with the atypical nature of at-risk students. Each student enters the program with unique cases, unresolved problems and numerous issues limiting their ability to succeed; no two students are the same. It is imperative for T5 to gain background information about the students that will enable him to provide support where he can. He describes the process as “*taking care of the person first*”. From a care ethics perspective, this is engrossment: interaction that reveals more information about the type of care that the student needs (Noddings, 1984). It also creates a path for bonding to take place between student and teacher. T5 showed he cared about the student as a person first and therefore could initiate the creation of common meaning between himself and the student. Implicitly, he indicates to the student that he cares about them as a person; the student, being conscious of their individual needs, responds to his initiative.

One of the founding practices used to recruit students for Program A was asking the prior class teachers about the prospective students to explain what the students need. According to T1, the purpose of the approach was to prevent the class teachers from “talking

up the students.” This approach kept the students’ past teachers’ opinions of the students’ character at a minimum, whether that opinion was good or bad. Therefore, the previous teachers’ opinions about the students’ character should have less influence on the students’ future teachers, favouring the students to get a fresh start.

Like Programs A and B, Program C does not endorse delving too much into the students’ backgrounds; they also want the students to conceptualize their participation in the program as getting a new start. T6 said exceptions are only made when there are concerns about particular issues. Students who seem to have challenges that might threaten the safety of others or require supports that the program does not have would be candidates for an inquiry into their school history. To give at-risk students a fresh start in their educational endeavours, the teachers focused more on what students need and less on students’ past school experience. Even though symbolic interactionists believe the past informs the present, a past that is symbolized by unfavourable experiences and failures is burdensome and can be a barrier to success. Defining the student from the perspective of their needs, and what has meaning for them currently, as a person, presents an opportunity for a fresh start.

Teaching how to handle failure.

At-risk students have experienced failures and have a high propensity to experience failures again. These failures do not just stem from their academic shortcomings (although this is often a factor), but also involves social or other issues in their lives. Over time, they may react emotionally to any allusions towards their failures or shortcomings. As individuals, in general, we are impressed by how others see us, and we imagine the associated feelings of the opinions others hold about us, and this impacts our thoughts. This results in feelings of pride or shame. Our responses and conduct towards others are shaped by our belief of how they see us (Cooley, 1902). In circumstances where the impression is negative, the emotional response can be negative, and positive impressions may elicit positive emotions. Below, G2

talks about how he responded whenever his classmates picked on him in his mainstream classes:

G2: With the teachers, it was fine. With the students, it wasn't really good. I have a bit of an anger problem, so someone would say something, and I would get mad, but other than that, the relationships between the students and me, and the teachers were fantastic...

Interviewer: Did you get picked on in your previous classes because you weren't comfortable?

G2: Just because I struggled a lot more than the other students because I struggle with reading, math and everything. I felt like I was picked on a lot more, and I was a lot smaller than all the other kids. (G2—PA—Int.#7 February 2019)

G2 believed that his classmates' reasons for picking on him at his previous school resided in their perception of his academic struggles and physical stature. Emotional attitudes underlay his actions, and G2 expressed the anger he felt when he fought his classmates. His emotional reaction was seemingly entrenched in his perception of their definition of him. Over time, his academic and social failure become a symbol for a negative emotional reaction. Eventually, he could have started defining himself through the gestures and experiences of his failures. Fortunately, this changed for him when he attended Program A; he said the teachers' way of teaching was suitable for the way he learned, and his classmates treated him well. Program A had a specific approach to teaching about failure, but all three programs had unique processes for handling student failure.

Program A was straight forward with their students about failure from the beginning of their relationship. The students in Program A were told directly that they will fail at tasks and will have to deal with it, but they (teachers) would guide them through it. The approach was oriented towards helping students acquire failure management skills. First, the students

were given permission to fail—it is normal for all humans to experience failure; second, teachers create situations (challenge tasks) in which they know the students will fail in their attempts; and, third, the students are guided through handling their failures. Through the activities, the teachers taught the students to work as a team and support each other, by building relationships, embracing their differences, and valuing each other's skills to persevere through these failure tasks. The students would find meaning in the experiences, would internalize these interactions as symbols that would later be used to govern their conduct. These skills not only helped them to get along with each other and succeed at the activity, but would also support them later in their lives when they encounter adverse situations. The students learned to choose to persevere and not yield to their failures.

As humans we are similar in that our words implicate the actions of the people we interact with; words reflect how we see the situation (Charmaz, 2014). Another aspect of teaching students how to handle failure is through a self-value system. The self as a constitution of our interactions and experiences of social situations can be laden with experiences of being defined by failures. To cultivate a valued self in students, the students can be engaged in activities in which they have to support each other by identifying and naming their values. For G1, while recollecting her experience as a team leader of a group activity, she said there was always support beneath her. She referred to her peers as always lifting her up: endorsing her strengths and letting her know she was capable. She attributed her rise in self-confidence to the experience in Program A. Human feelings of adequacy often originate in past interactions in which failure was experienced. Primarily, this condition can provide opportunities for the students to bank positive thoughts and feelings about themselves. Positive thoughts and feelings can dictate the emotional response, or the attitude students will have towards themselves or others in future interactions.

After transitioning from Program A to mainstream high school, G1 had an unpleasant experience with a teacher, and the positive thoughts she banked about herself helped her to handle the situation. She registered to take an online class, but the teacher in the mainstream high school told her that was not how she learned. G1 interpreted the teacher's comments as rude. She said she reflected what she had learned about persevering and remembered she had learned she was capable of doing anything in Program A, and she took the online class anyway. Her interactions from Program A were the stimulation for readjustment that lead her to act against her secondary teacher's opinion.

In Program B, the students are not set up for failure through games; however, the same message about failure is communicated through language as in Program A: perfection is not an expectation, failure is a natural part of our existence, and we can take action to deal with these consequences. To communicate this to his students, T5 shared his truth about his experiences with failure. In the excerpt below he explained what usually transpires:

When I tell students that I was kicked out of university after my second year not because I failed a class but because my GPA wasn't high enough. "What!" I said. I didn't work. What did I learn? I went and got a crappy job. I learned how hard it is to work for minimum wage. How easy was it to go back to school next year? I said it was simple. I said it never happened again. That letter that I got that said: "Hey, don't come back." Best thing ever happened to me. So, you got kicked out of university? Yeah. Kind of like, some of you have been kicked out of high school. What did you learn? It's not what happened. What did you learn from it? I say, hey, don't worry about it, I make tons of mistakes every day. You make a couple, so what? And they start figuring out that's what the world is about, we're people. We're not perfect.

(T5—PB—Int#6, January 2019)

T5 articulated to the students the role failure played in his experience, the meaning it left him with, and the action he took to overcome his failure. The fact that the experience had meaning for T5 implied that it is a significant symbol for him. Pointing out that the students failed in the way he did established a point of relatedness between himself and the students. Potentially, through sharing his experience with students, T5 hoped the students would take same meaning he grasped from his failure as their own. In telling his story, T5 took himself out of the teacher role, and indicated to his students that he is not superior to them; he is just as they are: a person who is not perfect. Failure is not selective; everyone is subject to making mistakes. He added that some teachers are not comfortable revealing their failures; they are of the belief that revelations of their failures will result in them descending the established social hierarchy when students learn about teachers having failed.

Program C takes a different approach in regard to addressing failure with students. Their stimulus for readjustment is giving students time to assimilate into the affective and physically nurturing environment and to protect them from failure, so there is nothing to fear, very different from programs A and B. The low pressure, the relaxing and supportive environment, aims to protect the students from failure and set them up for success, making adjustments where possible to help the students to succeed. T6 said students are grappling with their fears and other failures, outside of school, and so doing chores on the farm and doing academic work might be considered as adequate. They fear that asking the students to be more than they are might cause the student to feel pressured due to their unique and complex situations.

In all three programs the common message is that perfection is not an expectation. Setting up students for failure and creating conditions in which their sense of self is imbued with positive comments about their skills from their classmates helps them to move towards success. Transcending the usual projected image of teachers as perfect beings illustrates that

failure is not people-specific; it is normal for all human beings; the importance is to make meaning of the experience to overcome the situation. Even though the approaches are different, a clear message is communicated to the at-risk students: you will not be defined by your failures.

Removing traditional structures.

Most of these students were negatively affected by some of the normal practices of the mainstream classroom. The teacher participants are aware of some of these issues and tried to limit schooling practices that are barriers to the students' success.

Homework.

A teacher practice of assigning homework in many education systems is without guidelines, with teachers often assigning homework just for the sake of assigning homework. Marzano and Pickering (2007) reviewed several studies that examined the effectiveness of homework and found homework is only effective when used in a suitable way. Homework that is suitable should be meaningful, students should be able to complete it on their own, parents should not be made to play the role of enforcer or instructor, and the homework should be of a suitable quantity and level of difficulty for the student. Assigning homework just for the sake of giving homework, and without considering purpose and the limitations of the student may render homework ineffective and students may not care to complete it. Program A understood this classroom culture and made it a condition in the program that homework will not be treated as a customary practice. Below, T1 shares his view on the practice:

We also completely banned the notion of homework for homework sake. We would never give something that we expected them just to do. There were some projects that needed them to do stuff at home, but we would never give them like a math worksheet that we didn't give them time to work on. (T1—PA—Int#1, September 2018)

The intent is to change the symbolism of homework as a chore to tasks that are meaningful and necessary for work started in or will be followed up on in class. Program C's aim is to be flexible in their operation, protect their students from failure and avoid creating situations that make students feel burdened and overwhelmed. T6, of Program C, said homework completion created conflicts between students and teacher, and, as a result, the decision was made for homework to be given only when necessary. The teachers of Program C defined conflicts with their students for homework as a negative interaction that opposed the type of conditions they wanted to create. Negative interactions with teachers can result in negative interpretations of the school. Students who interpreted school negatively might not believe school is the best choice to make at the start of their day. Providing an environment that is welcoming helps to symbolize school as a positive place that is supportive of their emotional wellbeing, and an easy choice for students to make.

Release of control meaning student choice/autonomy.

T4 of Program A believed the feelings of powerlessness experienced by individuals in high-risk environments can be ascribed to their lack of control over situations that impact their well-being. T2 of Program A said the education system also renders students powerless in their practice of using overly instructive student management techniques: teachers ultimately direct and control students' actions. He described the practice as teachers "containing and maintaining control". Against these beliefs, the students of Program A were invited to regulate their conduct, with teachers releasing some control to them.

On one of my visits to program A, I observed students participating in a class discussion; everyone who wanted to participate raised their hand to indicate their intent just before the person speaking completed their final sentences; interestingly, the teachers also raised their hands when they wished to comment. Both students and teachers had the authority to name the person who should speak next. It was one of the best executions of a

class discussion I have seen in my teaching career. At-risk students come into classrooms with a greater interest to receive attention than to seek knowledge (Glasser, 1986). Giving students control is one means by which they are given not only attention, but power. They use their power to show they are capable of managing their conduct and demonstrate maturity, which should make it much easier to work on knowledge attainment.

In addition, in Program A, students were given roles to work independently on numerous tasks. The teachers described it as the gradual release of control. Students are not thrust into the roles, but rather, they practice doing tasks independently, and control is slowly released to them as they demonstrate the ability to work independently. T1 of Program A likened the practice phase to a video game tutorial level. The students practice repeatedly until they display mastery to act independently to complete a task, as control is slowly released to them. The intended outcome from these interactions is to change how students define themselves in terms of their capabilities. The teachers want their students to begin to see themselves as capable of taking charge of their conduct so as to do things independently.

T2 said many of their ideas for instruction came from someone saying, “*wouldn’t it be cool to do this.*” Teachers were not the sole selectors of classroom projects; students were actively involved and proposed ideas. T4 said during her tenure in the program, students planned and arranged activities and pitched them to the teachers. It was not just students taking the initiative to propose their ideas, it was a skill the teachers wanted all students who were not making that bold move to be able to do.

G3 of Program A said her attitude towards task completion changed through experiencing leadership roles. In comparison to her present mindset, she now views her past mindset as limiting. She said she was profoundly reticent and had a tendency to slough off her goals and not achieve them before the program. Now she sees herself as a leader capable of taking charge of situations, persevere, and take responsibility for her shortcomings. She

also disclosed that the experience and the skills she gained supported the roles she played in the jobs she has worked in since age 15. One of those jobs was managing a small family restaurant. Clearly, she had internalized the processes of her experiences, and made them her own, transforming her conduct, because they she found meaning in the experience.

Shared power is also endorsed with the young adults in Program B. Opportunities are provided for students to share in the decision-making process about their learning activities.

T5 of Program B defined the act as giving students choices:

I try to give them as much choice as I can. We need to know something like in the next block on the Sixties Scoop. They got to tell me they know something about the 60s scoop. How do you want to do it? And they'll go, what? I say, do you want to put a video together? I can teach you how to do that. Do you want to write about it? Sure. Do you want to make a poster? Sure. Do you want to just to sit down and talk about it? Okay. I give them a variety of ways. Then their job is to find the information, put it in there and their spin on it, to show me that they know what it's about and then tell me or show me. Sometimes we show it to everybody. I say, do you mind if I show it to everyone? Everybody might get to watch a video, or everyone might get to hear somebody's essay. Students decide about sharing. (T5—PB—Int#5, January 2019)

Sharing power in the classroom helps students to feel valued through being involved in the decision-making process of what and how they learn. Their participation in the decision-making process reminds them that their opinion matters, and they are considered competent enough to decide how they learn.

Students having shared responsibility deciding how they learn the material increases their interest. G6 of Program B indicated that he was encouraged by the interest shown in what he perceived about the learning material. G6's interpretation resulted from T5 giving his students the choice of how they present their information from a variety of modes: oral,

video, to add cultural music, written, etc. Similarly, in doing research, he gave them the freedom to gather their information from social media platforms they frequented if they asked to do so. Students are not just recipients of knowledge but are a part of the process of the construction. Learning is more involved with constructing than instructing.

Another benefit of students participating in the decision-making process is the enhancement of interpersonal skills among students when they engage in discussions with their peers about what they want to learn. G3 said making decisions as a group in Program A made them consider everyone's feelings and what they wanted to do. The process encouraged the development of skills in valuing differences, teamwork and emotional intelligence.

Student choice and autonomy are not common to all programs, with Program C contrasting, the nature of the students requiring more structure and support. Therefore, student choice and autonomy were not administered in the same manner as Programs A and C. There is far more teacher guidance regarding student projects in Program C.

Disallowing students to participate in the decision-making process about what and how they are learning can have a deleterious outcome for other students. Circumstances in which students are made to feel that they have no control can incite feelings of powerlessness and acrimony. After leaving Program A, G2's high school experience left him feeling demotivated and powerless. His mainstream high school teachers did not acknowledge his opinion on what worked best for him, which created a situation that ended with G2 becoming a quiet dropout. Below is an excerpt from his story:

It didn't make me feel good. That's a big reason why I did leave school because I was failing all my classes. Even though I told them I am failing these classes, I didn't get put in the regular classes, so I can learn and do my work. They were like no, this is what you got to do; this is what you are scoring at. (G2—PA—Int#7, February 2019)

The underlying narrative of G2's situation started prior to going to Program A. His grades were poor, and he had difficulty sitting in a desk. After a year in Program A, his grades improved significantly. Upon his return to the mainstream school system he did the CAT test, scored exceptionally well, and was placed in advanced classes. However, his grades plummeted in Grades 9 and 10 because he found it challenging to cope in the classes due to his learning style, which was not supported as it had been in Program A, except for the hands-on courses: welding and mechanics. He voiced his struggles to the teachers, but they did not pay attention to his plea until his plummeting grades were around 5 and 10 percent. Just two weeks before the end of the semester, the school administration decided to place him in regular classes. The situation was a source of frustration; he was distraught thinking of how he would catch up all the work he needed to do for the semester in two weeks and pass his finals with the grades he needed. He interpreted the situation as overbearing, and decided he needed to be separated from it. Subsequently, he quit going to school, and became a quiet dropout. Up to the time of the interview, he was still out of school. He said he planned to complete his secondary education, but he needed to find a suitable institution to do so. I suggested Program B and encouraged him to return.

Further inquiry into G2's experience revealed no one from the school contacted him to find out his reasons for not attending school. The teachers in the situation failed to consider G2's opinion on his learning style, or the impact the situation was having on him. If a caring relationship existed, the teachers would have interpreted the situation from a care perspective and would have constructed their actions from those precepts. Ethical caring begins with being attentive. "A carer is first of all attentive, watches and listens" (Noddings, 2012, p. 773b). Interpretation from a care perspective would readily recognize the student's challenges and take action that relieved or reduced the student's challenges, enabling him to function and achieve his goals.

Giving students breaks from the restrictions of mainstream school practices means to avoid creating situations and endorsing practices that foster negative perceptions of school. Activities that create conflict and are done without purpose can be avoided (for example, giving homework routinely, rather than only when necessary). Coaching students to exercise control over classroom activities and creating conditions that foster shared power relations between students and teachers promote increased student engagement.

Community.

The population of all three programs is made up of students from various schools and diverse backgrounds. To bring them together so that they bond in a community, the teachers create activities in their programs to develop a close-knit, positive environment. Furthermore, one of the issues that sometimes confronts at-risk students is a lack of familial support; being a part of a close-knit community is a medium for sustenance in their adverse circumstances. T1 said building a community around the students compensated for the support they were sometimes deprived of at home. The teachers and students bond in these classroom communities; their class communities symbolize family, having fun, and laughing together.

Becoming family.

In Program A, students are taught how to care for each other as members of a community in the way members of a family do. In the excerpt below, T4 talks about how they convey the expected conduct to students:

We taught them to take care of each other, and they were responsible for the safety of each other, and they're responsible for if somebody missed something to get them connected up once they got back to school. Creating that network again of safety, protection and family... We use the language "family" all the time, our family, our family of [Program A] our learning team families. We use the language a lot too, so

they heard it because that was something that they were seeking as well because that was important. (T4—PA—Int#4, November 2018)

The conduct within the group is constantly defined and emphasized through language. The repetitive use of the word family is used to symbolize the relational conduct, and continual affirmation and confirmation of the established conduct. Conduct in social groups are sustained through repeated affirmation of the conduct (Blumer, 1986). Initiating and defining family-like sentiments and acts to enhance the relations between students and teachers, and students and their peers conveys how they are to conduct themselves with each other. Family-like gestures of caring and being responsible for each other's safety should impress connectedness and belonging on the students' thoughts. The development of our minds and self take place at the same time, and are contingent on the understanding of the symbols and meanings of one's community (Mead, 1934). To impress on the students' minds that their actions in the classroom community should symbolize family through acts and language influences the students to regulate their conduct with family-like attitudes—developing bonds with their peers and teachers.

G3 of Program A said the interactive environment that was created in the classroom transformed how she related to others. She described her pre-Program A self as “closed off,” having little to no interaction with her peers. She practically had no friendships with her peers in the learning environment. Feeling disconnected from the people in her learning environment, she spent a substantial portion of her day outside which she attributed to multiple factors: one, her family situation that had her moving from school to school; two, the boredom she experienced from always being at least a chapter ahead in her class; three, being bullied and not accepted by her peers. Likely, through changing schools regularly she also stymied her chances of developing friendships and being accepted in her school community. Nonetheless, it is inexcusable to exclude anyone. Teachers can be overburdened with

connecting to all their students. However, at least two of the graduates from Program A stated they had to ensure their classmates did not feel excluded, which suggests the teachers were following up and ensuring the values the program promotes were maintained by the students. G3 referred to the community created in Program A as a family: “you show up, you are a part of a family.” The classroom symbolized family for her in response to the conditions created and promoted to build an inclusive and connected family.

Having fun, laughing together.

In Program C, T6 said the students and the staff bond and build relationships in the moments where they engage in conversations and have fun together. She said many of those moments take place around the kitchen table; the best conversations are the ones around the kitchen table in the mornings. Planned activities such as Coffee Fridays for which students gather around the kitchen island, enjoy coffee or tea, laugh together and engage in conversations are also moments in which they bonded. These moments are renowned for students to open up and share in conversation. Laughing together met students’ need to have fun. Meeting an individual’s needs fostered the development of healthy relationships. The morning conversations, which I observed, when the students arrived at school, was symbolic of a family-like interaction. Students got fruits and bagels from the kitchen while having informal conversations with their teacher. Conversations around the kitchen island is not the typical classroom or school picture. It is the picture of what people in a family or people who have a sense of connectedness do. It is not the expected interaction of persons in the roles of teacher and student.

G1 expressed that she was dedicated to school because being at school was fun. On days when she missed the bus, she would chase it until they noticed her or run downtown to get the bus to school because she loved Program A and did not want to miss anything. For G1, missing school meant missing out on fun, so she made exceptional effort to be at school.

Experiencing school as a fun place, students construct affinity towards school and want to be there.

Sharing, cooking, and eating.

In Program B, T5 said he often engaged the class in conversation, conversations on shared cultural experiences. For example, they would ask newcomer students how they experience school or things in their native countries, and Canadians, how they experience things in Canada in relation to the theme of the discussion. T5 gave an example in the excerpt below:

It's a melting pot, and they share their stories. They will talk about stories in the Philippines. When you went to school, did you ever get hit? They tell stories about corporal punishment in Filipino schools. Then I'll ask the girls, what was it like to go to school on the reserve. Did anybody get hit up there? No. OK. What happened when things went wrong? (T5—PB—Int#5, January 2019)

Whenever there were opportunities, Program B students would go to the cafeteria and make food from different cultures, for example chicken adobo from the Filipino students, perogies and sausage from the Ukrainian students, and bannock from the Canadian Indigenous students. In the process of preparing the food, they would have conversations on various topics. The cultural exchanges that took place between students helped to break down cultural barriers and promote understanding. G6 said he was enlightened and had fun in Program B hearing his classmates from Syria and Zimbabwe tell stories. Students sharing stories and food from their native cultures supported the development of pride in the students who shared an appreciation with the students who listened. Appreciation is about developing recognition for their fellow student's background and identity, which is knowledge of what comprises their worlds and has meaning for them. Knowledge can remove the barriers

formed by the differences and serve as a guide to construct their actions towards each other in the group setting.

G5 of Program B described the community there as family-like; he said they were respectful, nice, and persons who put a smile on his face. This was a reflection of his experience with the members of his classroom community, and what family meant to him. People tend to interpret situations based on their understanding of it (Charmaz, 2014). G4 also felt she was a part of a family in Program B, but for her, family meant interest and recognition. She liked the fact that they had question periods in which members of her classroom community asked about the things she liked to do and eat. In contrast to her mainstream school experience, she pointed out that teachers did not recognize students when they entered the room. However, based on her evaluation of the situation, she said the teachers had too many students to manage; therefore, it was difficult for them to recognize all students.

Summary of affective environment.

The affective conditions created in the programs aid the fostering of a positive sense of self in the students. Getting a fresh start relieved students of the burdens they carry from their past school experiences such as not being bombarded by perspectives from their past school experiences. Students' school experiences with failure that inhibit intrinsic motivation are handled with various approaches in each program; the general concept is for students to construct a new perspective and reinvent the way they handle failure. Actively participating in the classroom power structure helped students develop agency, making decisions about what and how they learn, and exercising responsibility to complete tasks. They experienced feelings of belonging and connectedness in the classroom community that was likened to family.

Physical Environment

Conditions for physical environment.

Physical objects are a part of our worlds and hold different meanings for each person. The conditions of the physical environment in each program had distinct qualities, separating them from mainstream classrooms.

Type of furniture.

Program A does not have regular classroom chairs or desks, except for the teacher's desk and chair. The teachers' desk is not positioned as for a traditional classroom, either at the very back or very front of the classroom, but rather was off to the side. The traditional location is for teachers to exercise authority and direct student conduct. In Program A, the students sit on couches that are arranged in a big circle with a sizeable space in the middle. They have tables that can be folded up or down if they need to work at one. During my visits the teachers were only seen sitting at their desk when they were working on their computers. There is a large space outside the classroom that I observed being used for independent work, learning games, presentations to lower grades and as a lunch area for teachers and students to share their lunches together.

During discussions, Program A teachers did not stand before the students, ever. They sat in the circle with the students on the couches, a demonstration of equality between students and teachers. According to T4, the ideology underlying the structure of the classroom is from the Indigenous circle. Sitting in the circle is a demonstration of equality among all, equality that acknowledges everyone as persons, although the students are told it is the teachers' responsibility to facilitate and direct learning and ensure the security of everyone in the setting. Sitting on the couch fosters a sense of belonging, which is significant to the students' emotional security. For the teachers, the set-up minimizes misconduct and supports the modelling of appropriate communication skills. The students in Program B sit in

desks and chairs, but in a half-circle. No one sits behind another person. The teacher's desk is at the side. The students in Program B are adults, and, from time to time, the teacher and the teacher assistant could be seen sitting next to the students at their desks assisting them with their work.

Program C operates from a regular family house; it is located outside of the urban area, on agricultural land, and overlooks the river. Some of the rooms are retrofitted for classrooms and the administrator's office. The other rooms are set up like rooms in a regular family home. The kitchen has an open concept design, with regular kitchen appliances, food, and a central island where students can make their own snacks and visit with the teachers and one another. When lunch is being prepared in the kitchen, the aroma fills the house, and gives a homey feel. The kitchen opens onto the living room, which has several couches arranged in a circle, where students can watch television or play video games, or play fooseball. The room's design allows for a lot of natural light to enter and that is where the students begin their day. After getting off the school bus, they first enter the kitchen, where some students make themselves breakfast, and interact with the teachers, and others gravitate to the living room, where they lounge on the couches, conversing while playing games, or quietly listen to the conversation. When the kitchen group is done breakfast, the principal and teacher come to the living room for a whole group talk, and then the students go to the classroom. Interestingly, the seating arrangement in the classroom is similar to a traditional classroom; the students are seated in tables and chairs arranged in rows.

The furniture and arrangement in Program A is different from that of a traditional classroom. The classroom arrangement in Program C is similar to a traditional classroom but there are additional rooms that are furnished like a family home for the students to bond and share with each other. Program B classroom is similar to a traditional classroom, but the set-

up is slightly different from a traditional classroom, with the desks in a horseshoe arrangement, where all students can see one another's faces.

Experiences out of classroom.

The physical building is not the only space of learning for the students of Program A; the students spend a substantial portion of the school year engaged in outdoor education going on camping trips, field trips, and engaging in volunteer activities. T3 believes having classes in the outdoor spaces impacts students who hold negative memories about being in a school building. Program C's location outside of the city on agricultural land by the river is also opportune for students to participate in experiences outside of the classroom. Below, T6 talks about the benefits of the farm school setting:

I think the setting, being out, just being away from all the stuff. Being away from all the typical high school, big high school, city problem issues that happen during the day. At least we can protect them for five or six hours a day. (T6—PC—Int#9, November 2019)

T6 said the peaceful and calm surroundings have a therapeutic impact on the students. The distracting elements or conduct influencing conditions students encounter in the mainstream classrooms are not present. Caring for the land and animals on the farm, the scenery, the ability to explore the outdoors on nature walks with their teachers are deemed as therapeutic conditions that help the students to succeed. In the classroom, there was evidence of their collections from the nature walks with the teachers on shelves in the classroom—skulls, rocks, bird nests. Likewise, T3 of Program A said spending time in the natural environment while camping “creates a different way for the students to be with a teacher.” Teachers and students spending leisure time on the land together create opportunities to bond, especially in situations in which they have to work together, and the students need to talk with the teachers to solve problems.

Teacher: pupil ratio.

All three programs had teacher: pupil ratios that were lower than typical mainstream classroom. Program A had the highest teacher: pupil ratio (1:14) of the three programs. In smaller classes, there is usually greater student-teacher engagement. G4 found that the small class size in Program B was a suitable condition for her to get more attention from her teachers, meaning more student-teacher interaction, which strengthened student-teacher relationships. The experiences also enabled her to feel emotionally secure because she was spending more time with the same people in the same space, and she was able to build relationships with her peers. In her Grade eight year in a mainstream school, prior to entering Program B, she had had few friends, little to no individual attention from her teachers, and struggled with anxiety and depression. She said her anxiety and depression developed from both the challenges she was having at school and at home. She was only able to function with her condition and progress in her secondary education when she started in Program B. The low number of students in Program B allowed her to receive more individual attention and to bond with her peers.

Program C also had a low teacher: pupil ratio. During the period of data collection there were 18 students enrolled with 1.6 teachers and the principal (about 1 teacher to 11 students). One teacher worked with the students full-time, teaching particular subjects, and the other teacher worked just over half time, and taught other subjects. The principal also taught in addition to her administrative duties. There was also a program assistant who performed various duties to support the staff and students. Program A had 28 students and two teachers which is also a low teacher: pupil ratio. The teachers took turns teaching while the other provided support for the students or worked with a group of students. In all three programs there were fewer students to one teacher compared to that which existed in the mainstream school system. Therefore, the teachers have more time to work with individual

students and build a relationship. In addition, T2 and T4 of Program A said working with a partner teacher supports teaching students how to operate in a healthy relationship with another person—interacting respectfully even when they disagree.

Summary of physical environment.

No two programs are identical in their setup, with differences in geographical location, building type and layout, furniture, and teacher: pupil ratio. Both teachers and students indicated that these features had a part in supporting the success achieved. The low teacher: pupil ratio, spending time in the natural environment away from wall-bounded classrooms, feeling human connectedness sitting together on couches, and attending school every day in a house with a family atmosphere, increased the opportunities for teachers and students to bond and develop connectedness as families do.

Instructional Style

Adjusted academic expectations/differentiated learning.

Program C has an adjusted school day; the school day starts at 9 a.m. and ends at 2:30 p.m. T6 believed the shortened school day made it easier for students to get through the day. To add to that are the farm care activities which are categorized as “practical arts” for curricular reasons and are done in the last period of the school day. It is a requirement for students in Grades 1 to 10 within the educational jurisdiction to take Practical and Applied Arts. Outside of the winter months, the students are taught hands-on landscaping and basic life skills. The students are supported to successfully complete their assignments as best as possible. The actions taken are usually to make adjustment to the process to help students to succeed in spite of the limiting circumstances.

The teachers confront the situation by making accommodations in the program that helps the students overcome their circumstances and be successful. For example, a student who attends poorly, due to financial issues, such as not having a transit pass to get to school

or other issues is protected from failure as a consequence of missed classes and assignments. Adjustments are made so the student is able to complete as many assignments as possible on the days they are in attendance to maintain their progress at a reasonable pace, preventing them from feeling overwhelmed.

In programs B and C, the teachers adjust instructional delivery by differentiating instruction to address students' skill deficits and learning style so they can achieve success. In Program A, the project-based teaching method is utilized to support various skill levels and learning styles. Below T4, gives an example of the students' participation in a class project that represents differentiated instruction:

Having multiple entry points into projects so that somebody who isn't as strong academically can still have a successful project by the end. Somebody might just be measuring a piece of cloth to be able to put around a table whereas somebody else might make a full dress for their doll...There's still work in the fractions, the measurement, but the one that made the doll has taken it way beyond and had to do way more measurements and had to do way more calculations. But my other kids who didn't have to measure as much still did basic foundation of fraction work that had to be done for this year for the curriculum. (T4—PA—Int#4, November 2018)

The project creates opportunities for students of different abilities to take part and feel successful working within their skill level and to perform a productive role. This practice also alleviates boredom and disengagement in students who perform at an advanced level in their academic skills. For example, G3 said there were many instances in her mainstream classes in which she was bored and disinterested in the lessons the teacher was delivering because the material was elementary for her skill level, but in Program A she was always engaged. There were always activities to do or tasks to help out with such as prepping camping bags, tents, or cleaning coolers.

For program B, T5 said he differentiated the learning material for his students based on their ability because performance impacted students' affect, especially in the presence of their peers. To enhance the opportunities for students to feel successful intrinsically so they are motivated to do more, students who struggle with reading were assigned their reading tasks to practice before the reading class. Creating opportunities for students to be successful even though they struggled indicates care and support for the way students would experience the class emotionally. Differentiating the process and caring for the students' emotional experience is also reflected when students are allowed to use different ways to show what they know. In Program B, the content and the processes are differentiated based on the students' interest and abilities.

Scaffolding.

Another way in which Programs A and B differentiate the process is by using scaffolding. Scaffolding is done in Program B with the teacher playing the role of the more knowledgeable other. As the more knowledgeable other, T5 divided the reading material into manageable portions for the students and gradually moved them to bigger portions as they improved. Through dividing the material into portions, the students were moved through stages of manageability until they got out of their comfort zone. T5's underlying construct for this action was embedded in the idea that his students were adults whose enthusiasm had been thwarted by the experience of school disengagement. Differentiating the process through scaffolding helped to reengage students to participate.

In Program A, the process is differentiated to scaffold struggling students using the cooperative learning model. The students worked cooperatively in learning teams that were strategically selected to balance abilities, so that students could play the role of the more-knowledgeable-other. The more-knowledgeable-other were students who were mastering the area of focus. Students acting as the more-knowledgeable-other, assisted the students on their

learning teams who needed support, alleviating the burden on teachers by reducing the number of students they had to assist.

Cooperative learning.

In Program B, cooperative learning was rarely used; it was used based on the quality of the relationship that existed among the students in the group; the group changed every few months, as some students completed credits for courses, and moved back to regular classrooms. According to T5, trusting relationships take a while to develop among adults, and so, without trust, he would not compel the students to work cooperatively. Students were only given group assignments when they had been able to earn each other's trust. If they did not trust each other, few group assignments were given. Even so, the students were the ones who decided who they wanted to work with, unless it was a short activity. Furthermore, not all students wanted to work in a group; some students wanted to work by themselves, and the teacher honoured those choices. Otherwise, the efforts to achieve the outcomes were futile because the students would not do their part if they were not comfortable, as well as the fact that adults who have disengaged from school do not like to be told what to do.

Similarly, in Program C, cooperative learning was not a frequently used learning model. T6 said it was mainly utilized based on students' conduct. The practice did not work well with students at-risk because of poor conduct. However, for Program A, cooperative learning was frequently used in comparison to the other two programs. Program A was a full year program, encompassing all the different subject areas; as well, the students were younger than in the two secondary programs B and C. The students in Program A went through processes that helped them to develop interdependent skills. They participated, early in the school year, in trust building exercises, they were coached on how to value the skills and opinions of their team members and selected their teams in an honouring way. Below, T1 explained how groups were selected for cooperative learning:

In the beginning, we actually assign them learning teams, and we assign them learning teams based on combining strengths and weaknesses as best as we know, so that means we gender balance as much as we can, we physical balance: big kids, small kids. We use academic [abilities], from whatever we know about their academics. We try to make sure every team has a strong language arts person. Every team has a strong math person. (T1—PA—Int#1, September 2018)

The students in Program A are of younger than those in programs B and C and, although at-risk, have not experienced disengagement from education or school failure to the same extent; I presume they would be more willing to engage in cooperative learning with their peers. With the teachers coaching the students to develop interdependent skills, they were also helped to understand the type of conduct necessary in group situations.

Relevancy.

Instruction in Program B and for a few students in program C was guided by the locally developed modified curriculum, allowed for school divisions to develop for students who struggle academically. For Grades 10 to 12; the regular curricula allow students to go on to post-secondary education, which is the curricula used by most of the students in Program C. When students complete their Grade 12 certificate, if they have taken the modified curricula, they are not eligible for many post-secondary programs, but they do have their Grade 12 certificate, which they can use as a means of qualification for employment. Program A uses the regular Grade 8 curricula, which the teachers used in their cross-curricula integration for project-based instruction. Learning experiences should be stimulating and interpreted in a meaningful way to the students. According to T1, the quality of the engagement in schools dictates how both students and teachers experience school. T3 endorses this point of view, the content that makes sense for students in teaching and learning are:

Things that are authentically engaging and have something meaningful attached to it.

(T3—PA—Int#3, November 2018)

The instructional model in Program A is mostly experiential through project-based activities. The learning experiences involve outdoor education activities, participation in public events or other educational excursions. The camping activities are not just a recreational event, they also engage in learning activities. For example, one of the objectives in their Science curriculum is to investigate water. To achieve the objective they build water filters, test them to find out which water filters are better, reflect on the activity, write a report and present it. The hands-on approach engages and motivates the students to want to do more as indicated by G3 in the excerpt below:

All of the curricula were basically copy and paste from a textbook (mainstream school). [T1] took us out one time on a hiking trip, and we had to calculate how tall the tree was by just using the shadow. We got to do some of the stuff that was in the textbook. We got to see how it applied to real life. Like if we were out hiking and we needed to build a tipi, we need to find trees that are how big. (G3—PA—Int#8, February 2019)

G3 referred to her mainstream school experience as copying and pasting from the textbook, suggesting she did not value the experience. T4 of Program A said instruction that is meaningful to students is realistic and practical, realistic in that students should be able to apply what they are learning to their reality, and practical in that they need skills that they can use. Teaching students skills they can use comes with an understanding of how they are doing the curriculum. T3 said it is empowering for the students to be able to explain what they are learning to their family or a member of their community. Having the ability to explain what they are learning to others has its place in the learning experience as well; the students often taught the knowledge they gained to students in the lower grades and other

individuals who attended their presentations, which was also an empowering act for students, since they recognized that others found value in the knowledge they imparted.

Program B used the modified version of the secondary curriculum but developed around real-life concepts that the students could or would be relating to in the future such as rent, tax and discount calculations. T5 selected and used material that connected to students' reality as best as he could. On one of my visits, the text that was being used for the reading exercise had the main character of Aboriginal descent which was the background of some of the students in the class, thus supporting their ability to resonate with the character.

One deficit that researchers (Kim & Taylor, 2008; McGee & Lin, 2017) found in alternative education programs they studied was the limited offerings of career and life skills training, but inside Program B's classroom, the focus was not only on credit attainment and building relationships; the students also took part in a work education program. In the work education program, the students were taught work readiness skills and placed in an organization for two weeks for on the job training. In addition to the work readiness training, the process had the potential to help the students acquire work references and perhaps employment, as well as develop networks with the people they interacted with during the experience.

Summary of instructional style.

Each of the three programs took a different approach to instruction. It was evident in the teachers' descriptions of the instructional approaches that their underlying constructions of delivery style was situated in what they believed was relevant and practical for the students' situations, conduct, abilities, and learning styles in their programs.

The Theory

My use of the constant comparison method— “inductive processes of comparing data with data, data with code, code with code, code with category, category, with category, and category with concept” (Charmaz, 2014, p. 342) — to examine the data did not produce a theory from the analysis. Since, a theory was not constructed I revisited the codes on relationships; these codes were among the most prominent ones. Perusing the codes, I came across T1’s statement “We were going to act in a caring relationship” which incited my interest to assess the conditions described in the programs and their connection with Noddings’ (1984) ethics of care theory.

The actions and events in all three programs display components of the fundamental concepts of ethics of care theory: “receptivity, relatedness and responsiveness” (Noddings, 1984, p. 2). Interaction is a pivotal conditionality of all three concepts, which is why the symbolic interactionism perspective is an apt epistemology to deduce the conditions of ethics of care theory in the data. Teacher-student relationships is largely recognised in the transformational effort, but the instructional approach and the classroom environment underpin the effort as well. The affective environment is also largely influential in students making the choice to be cooperative and attend the programs, which is the rationale for using Glassers’ (1986) control theory to define the graduates’ interpretations of and teachers’ actions in the affective environment.

Figure 1

Showing the Concepts of Caring Relationships and the Caring and Supportive Environment



Students enter their programs with various inherent needs, challenges and unfavourable experiences that help to shape their unique identities; some are school related and some are not. Notwithstanding the origin of the students' experiences, positive response to the conditions created in the programs, and the relationship with their teachers garnered from their interpretation and symbolism of the conditions indicate they are experiencing relief from their circumstances or they are able to foresee the potential of the program to change the precarious situation they are in with their education.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

Introduction

My conversations with the participants were riveting and heart-warming. Listening to their stories, the teachers spoke with compassion spliced with altruism and sometimes tears about their students' wellbeing and progress; the graduates' multifarious expressions of their past struggles and the joy they experienced in their respective programs developed into an ensemble of symbolic interactions and connected experiences. This ensemble of connected experiences boasted distinctive characteristics for each program, but the symbols derived from the descriptions and experiences were not unique to one program; the programs had many commonalities. What made them common was mostly in their place of origin and focus: a place of care and a focus on personhood.

Constructivist grounded theory was used to answer the following questions: 1. What conditions do teachers of alternative education programs identify as necessary for at-risk students to succeed? 2. What do graduates of the three programs identify as meaningful or symbolic in the conditions created in the programs? 3. What are the underlying theories in the conditions identified in these programs? Constructivist grounded theory methods enabled the process of facilitating the multiple individual accounts of teacher and student participants. The accounts revealed variations in the teachers' educational practice and the students' interpretation and response to the conditions that emerged from the multiple experiences and perspectives. The interpretation process focused on the interactions described by individual participants and what they identified as meaningful in these interactions: the meanings communicated, acted on, or symbolized. The actions and meanings communicated are interrelated, with one impacting others (Charmaz, 2014). However, the realities derived from the constructed actions and the meanings interpreted by the graduate participants in their

respective settings are not uniform but there is a generality in the type of conditions that had meaning for them.

All four conditions identified (caring relationships, affective environment, physical environment, instructional style) emerged in all three programs as relevant to the students' success; these conditions varied in practice across programs, depending on the motives of the teachers, and seemingly functioned for the particular group of students in the program. Student-teacher relationships were deemed significant in all three programs and emphasized as very important for achieving success with the students. Constructivist grounded theory methodology facilitated the examination of processes (Charmaz 2014); therefore, inquiry of the events in all three programs showed the processes of the conditions as multiple and varied to meet the needs of the students. There are multiple occurrences in the graduates' description of their experiences in which they attributed improvement of a personality or academic issue to the conditions in their program or the care of their alternative education teachers. In both graduate and teacher narratives, I saw caring that is to a great degree situated in Nel Noddings (1984) ethics of care theory.

The process of constructing and maintaining caring relationships between at-risk students and their teachers has many associations with the practices of Nel Noddings ethics of care theory. The interpretation process associated with the symbolic interactionist perspective play an epistemological role demonstrating the associations between the teachers' practices, the graduates' interpretation of these practices and ethics of care theory, which shows caring as authentically occurring through interaction. I believe it is safe to say the teachers' emphasis on the forging of relationships with students and the students' interpretation of their teachers' actions indicated that ethical caring is naturally occurring in the student-teacher interactions. In the section below I will discuss the emergence of the characteristics of ethics of care theory through symbolic interactionist perspective.

Ethics of Care Theory

Noddings (2002) posited relation as the core feature of care ethics; therefore, care ethics is primarily relational. In an ethically caring relationship, there is connectivity between the individuals involved, defined by their consciousness of the existence of an affect in each other as they engage in the situation in question (Noddings, 1988). Since ethics of care is a relational act, the mutual consciousness of affect between the at-risk students and their teachers is developed through interaction. Individuals involved in a social interaction as aligned with symbolic interaction, construct separate actions by way of an interpretation process to organize their approach to the conduct of the other they are interacting with. The interpretation process involves acknowledging and altering their desires, motives, emotional state, and way of thinking, then coming to a conclusion about the aptness of the norms and merits, and then constructing actions based on their conclusions in relation to the other's conduct (Blumer, 1986). Even though the interacting individuals construct separate actions towards each other, they are acting towards a common meaning. Interaction is symbolised by common language (verbal, non-verbal) and meanings (Charmaz, 2014). The teachers' approach to the students is organized from the vantage point of shared meaning, and, likewise, the students' in their responses do the same. Each acknowledges the other's action, interpreting and assigning meaning to the action that is acknowledged.

Pianta (1999) described teacher-student relationships as a dyad constituting different components: one, individuals bring unique identities to the relationship—biology, personality, a history of relationship experiences, etc.; two, the feedback processes—how both participants in the relationship relay, perceive, and process information between each other; three, the asymmetric relationship system—the relationships that develop between student and teacher is unequal in the sense that the child is deemed the less mature

participant, and the adult is the more mature participant assuming responsibility for the overall condition of the relationship.

Both teachers and at-risk students bring their unique identities to the relationship. Within the teachers' unique identities are their prior experiences with at-risk populations, personal life experiences, pedagogical and affective skills among others. For the students, they bring their personal experiences, shortcomings, need for attention, disengagement from school, negative feelings about themselves and school environments among others. The disparities between the teacher and student identities can make feedback between them impossible without understanding of each other. Teachers and students alike affects each other subjectivities (Noddings, 1988)

Pianta (1999) conveyed that the interchanges between individuals within the feedback process is a way of interpreting relationships; it shows the aims and coordination of the relationship and form the pattern for interaction overtime. Since the feedback process is a way of understanding relationships and forms the pattern of interaction overtime, teachers and at-risk students entering into a relationship with unique identities need to develop shared meaning. The construction of shared meaning in a student-teacher relationship can support a pattern of interaction that unambiguously convey meanings and coordination. Developing shared meaning constructs the area of relatedness between the participants which is essential in caring relations .

The probability of acquiring shared language and meanings increases as students and teachers interact. They share information and begin to construct perspectives of each other. However, the one caring (teacher) has a greater responsibility in the relationship to develop a dual perspective of the relationship, from the vantage point of both carer, and the cared for (Noddings, 1984). Having greater responsibility makes the relationship unequal or asymmetric as ascribed by Pianta (1999). Within the context of his discussion, Pianta

attributed teacher-student relationship asymmetry to adult-child and maturity. In the context of this study, there are teachers and students who are both adults; hence the unequal nature of the dyadic relationship between the teachers and the at-risk students is applied based on responsibility.

Constructing shared meanings.

Teachers, as the ones caring, have a greater responsibility to guide the relationships and take initiatives to forge relationships with the subjects in their care. Crucial to their responsibility is understanding the worlds of their students, which constitutes what has meaning for the students. Presumably, what has meaning for the student has some bearing on how they interpret and respond to others. Care is relationally defined, with the motive to care arising from the situation that is under consideration which is the essence of the relationship (Noddings, 2002). Without a dual perspective of themselves and the students, the one caring (teacher) guiding the relationship is likely to construct their actions solely from their own or institutional perspective; an abstract view of students, that could void the possibility of constructing shared meanings. Teachers constructing their actions based personal or institutional perspective are acting based on assumed needs, as was in the case of G2 when he was placed and kept in the advanced mainstream class, even though he expressed his need to be removed. Teachers attending to student's expressed needs is more beneficial to the caring relation (Noddings, 2012a).

All the teacher participants entered their teaching situation with an approach that is already taking shape from prior experiences with at-risk students (personal, work related). In their descriptions of their prior experiences, there is evidence of reflexive thinking that identified differences and drew conclusions about students at-risk and themselves. In their reflexive thinking, most teachers defined or implied that their upbringing or their current position is one of privilege in comparison to their students' and demonstrated they were

conscious of the externalization of inner turmoil, disparities in communication style, and the indeterminism of the students' situations. In the teachers' interpretation, it was apparent that their perspective about at-risk students started taking shape in their prior experiences. Their prior experiences support the creation of a juncture for shared meaning to develop between students and teachers. Their perspectives were shaped by their prior experiences, but it was not a case of assumed need; their expression of empathy demonstrated that they were prepared to care.

Symbolic interactionists believe the interpretation process is of utmost importance for achieving shared meanings. The interpretation process involves two steps, one—the subject recognizes and points out to themselves what they are acting towards (self-interaction), two—the subject assesses and alters what is known (interpretation), applies meaning to the situation, then constructs their actions (Blumer, 1994). Interacting with the students in the pre-program activities such as Gym Blast and application camps of Program A, the conversations in the intake meetings of Programs B and C, are all situations in which students identified what they were acting towards. The students either chose to refuse or to join their respective programs, when the teachers told them what they could do for them. From these interactions, two-thirds of the graduates named conditions of the programs they learned of, interpreted as meaningful to their situation (independence, hands on learning, one subject days, outdoor learning), and made the decision to choose the programs. For the other one-third, they were matched up with the program by case workers, but through subsequent interactions they found the programs meaningful to their situation; the program met a need or needs they had.

Receptivity.

Acknowledging, attentiveness, listening, identifying, naming, indicating, awareness are all key words that are found in the receiving category of the affective domain of Bloom's

Taxonomy (Bloom, 1956; Anderson & Krathwohl, 2000). Receiving is the base for everything else in the domain; receiving is the foundation for a response. Receiving is followed by responding, defined as compliance to take part. A few of the associated key words to the responding category are complies, conforms, helps, performs, presents, tells, discusses among others. At-risk students and teachers developing “affective awareness” in each other not only translates shared meanings, they are also in the process of receiving each other in the caring relationship. Affect involves thinking, listening, asking questions about the cared-for that call forth additional information, and reflecting on the information garnered (Noddings, 2012b). Subsequent to reflecting on (interpreting) the additional information received, further participation is needed in the situation. Follow-up action is required from both teachers and students constructing and directing their response to the situation. Caring situations require the individuals involved to accede to the manner in which they will respond to each other (Noddings, 1988).

Graduates identified and named conditions in the programs that resonated with their situations, in some instances, they described their teachers as “nice” and “treating them like real people” in their first encounters. The students naming the teachers’ actions is affirmation of the way they experienced in the interaction with the teacher. Teachers engaging students in person-to-person interactions facilitated both teachers and students in identifying what they were acting towards. The teachers noted the students’ values, beliefs, needs, and experiences that shaped who they were. Students noted the teachers’ gestures, and their attitude towards them. From both teachers’ and students’ accounts, the gestures were about what was needed and what could be done for the students, and not their shortcomings. Students expressed their needs and teachers let them know what they are going to do for them.

T5’s objective in conversations where he avoids talking to students about their struggles in school is to focus on their young adult lives and whatever else they might be

experiencing outside of school. Sharing in regular person-to-person conversations about their lives enabled the construction of feelings of freedom to be themselves and set a tone that encourage them to share in the conversations. Engaging in conversations with students, teachers found that making disclosures about themselves aided change in students' conceptualization of them holding positions of power, and encouraged students to form attachments with them (Beck & Malley, 1998). Two of the graduates symbolised the teachers practice of sharing about their lives as family-like and caring; a confirmation that they felt comfortable in the situation to be themselves. "How people view their situations and those of larger groups, and how they name things affects what they know, how they know it, and the actions they take" (Charmaz, 2014, p.272). The way in which the teachers perceived their students' situations, determined the actions they constructed in the situation. The students' interpretation of their teachers' actions in the situation was evident in the way they named it. Students at-risk will hold teachers who care about their lives outside of school in high regard (Lagana-Riordan et al., 2011).

Not all students actively engaged in interaction and readily showed responsiveness. Teachers associated with Programs A and C spoke of students they had in their programs who did not interact with their peers or teachers during the initial stage of their programs. These students were mainly observers in the beginning of the relationship, but their limited interaction did not prevent them from taking note of what had meaning to them. Shared meaning and language can also be unspoken (Charmaz, 2014). The teachers who had these students in their programs did not construct actions towards the students to coerce or make them feel indifferent, instead their line of conduct towards the students was maintaining a supportive caring environment around the students until they felt comfortable enough to open up. Supposedly, these students observed, interacted with themselves and concluded it was safe to participate when they chose to do so. As was mentioned above self-interaction is one

of the ways individuals construct meanings. The students spoke enough to be admitted to the program and made the choice to show up for school signifies they interpreted what exist and acted accordingly.

Interacting as persons and not in the traditional student-teacher manner—interaction of roles—supports the cultivate authentic relations between students and teachers. Individuals socially interact as people not as roles (Blumer, 1994). Within every role is an individual who holds multiple identities and interprets the action of others from the perspectives associated with those identities. Caring agents are expected to be concerned about their subjects' feelings and their potential actions in situations (Noddings, 1988). In the interactions “the teacher recognizes the intrinsic worth of the student as a person, as one who, in actuality or potentiality becomes capable of exercising ... the ability to make personal choices and decisions and accept responsibilities for these” (Hult, 1979, p. 242). Interacting with students and recognizing their worth calls forth natural affect in the teachers, which Noddings (1984) referred to as “prepared to care” (p. 31). Recognizing that their teachers are prepared to care for them effectuates affect in the students as well.

As mentioned in the former section, the teachers' use their prior experiences with at-risk population to engage in reflexivity, which help to shape how they act towards the students; preparing them to care for the students. Being prepared to care also means the teachers were able to develop dual perspectives about themselves and the students. They noted that they were conscious of their tendencies and the disparities between their personalities. Some interactions are shaped in a historical context (Charmaz, 2014). In the excerpt below, the graduate describes symbolism in the language the teachers used in their first interaction; an indication that they were prepared to care:

The people who were presenting, I didn't know at the time were the teachers. The way that they were, they treated us like real people, not like we are just kids, not like we

are just Grade Seveners. They were like; you have a mind, you are intelligent, you can do things, you can learn things. (G3—PA—Int#8, February 2019)

She appreciated their recognition of not only her potential but their acknowledgment of her as a person. “*Not like we are just kids, not like we are just Grade Seveners,*” shows the student has high regard for being acknowledged as a person and not in the abstract role of a grade seven children. Caring agents’ (teachers’) recognition of students’ intrinsic worth, is indicated in their affect in the actions or gestures they construct towards their students, and the students acknowledge and interpret their actions and gestures as meaningful. This generates awareness of an affect in each other.

Engrossment, motivational displacement and reciprocity.

An affective response from the teacher may involve inquiry into issues students might be struggling with in their lives, and provide them with or direct them to support they need to improve their situation. T5 tendency to ask students to speak their truth in the intake meetings is not only about hearing the difficulties in their lives, but also, he does it to decipher how he can help the students. There are students who care about the interest their teachers show in their lives. For example, G6 was perturbed by the fact that his mainstream school teachers did not show interest in the challenges he was having at home. Affective response means actively attending to students’ needs and create conditions that support or provide relief for the students. In the language of Noddings’ (1984) such action is a state of *engrossment*.

In this study, engrossment in care was evident in the actions of teachers providing students with food, engaging students in conversation when they enter the classroom to show recognition, calling home when they do not show up for school, giving students time to catch up on sleep when they show for school up looking tired. The teachers’ ability to respond in such a manner also flows from having a dual perspective of the situation. Using their knowledge (assumed needs) of what students generally need to function and achieve, and

what they learned about the students' situation (expressed needs) to create conditions that helped the students to function. Teachers create symbolism in the interaction using the information they garnered in their affective interaction with the students. They defined their approach, taking into account what had meaning to the students, made gestures to the students, and constructed actions in regard to those meanings.

For some teachers, over time, the affective connection they developed with students enabled them to read the students' emotional cues and direct their actions towards them before they fell apart. The teachers who referred to these type of situations said they engaged with students and put aside the task they had been attending to, and handled the needs of the student. They adjusted the plans they made for that day to include activities that would help students to cope when things were not going right for the student. Noddings (1984) described this as *motivational displacement* but cautioned against doing so to the disservice of others involved. To add to that, motivational displacement should be contingent on the nature of the issue. For example, G4 of program B said her teacher was able to detect when her anxiety was welling up and gave her permission to go take a walk in the school building which provided relief. In this case, the teacher did not need to displace his motivation, and was able to provide relief for the student. Sometimes, it is as simple as being attentive and flexible to help students with their struggles.

The exchanges between the student and the teacher determine whether the recipient of the care (student) recognizes that the caring agent (teacher) is attuned and responsive to their needs. It is also within this process that the teacher is able to confirm, through the student's response, whether they accept the care—showing up for classes, feeling free to be themselves. Students' participation is indicative of their acceptance of the care. In the educational context of care ethics, this is *reciprocity* when the cared for complies in the relationship. An organic response is preferred over one that is coerced. A coerced response is

not indicative of reciprocity. There are more than two references in the teachers' descriptions of students making personal choices to be part of one of the alternative programs or show up for school. When an individual's needs are being satisfied or there is adequate indication that the need or needs will be satisfied—in the case of students initial response to the program—the choice will be made to give the desired response (Glasser, 1986). With reciprocity, the caring agent (teacher) constructs a broader view—contingent on the students' response—of what the (cared-for) care about, work towards, what gratifies them, or provides joy, and directs more specific actions in the care. In response the student also looks to the teacher for guidance that emerges from the teachers' actions (Noddings, 1984).

The teachers and students' responses are identified with Blumer's (1986) interpretation of Mead's version of symbolic interactionism (presentation of gestures). Gestures are actions that form a part of a larger or progressing activity and imply: "what the person to whom it is directed to do, what the person making the gesture is going to do, the joint action that is to arise by articulation to the acts of both" (p. 9). From the students' responses, the teachers decipher whether or not the student is showing reciprocity to the gestures and whether they comply in a caring relationship. From the teachers' response with engrossment, the students can deduce the teachers' interest to care and form a relationship. Examples of this appeared in G3 of Program A who recognized the teacher's intent to attend to her without being impersonal, and of G6 of Program B who recognized his teacher cared about him when they shared about their lives.

Realizing the students' reciprocity, the teachers are likely to keep the momentum going or even do more in caring for the student. Recognizing the teachers' engrossment, students are likely to work harder, show respect, develop trust for their teachers. G1 of Program A said she developed trust for her teacher through the observation of daily small acts. Responding positively to the gestures presented (achieving reciprocity and

engrossment) is an expression of common meaning to both parties. “The freedom, creativity, and spontaneous disclosure of the cared for that manifest themselves under the nurture of the one caring complete the relationship” (Noddings, 1984, p. 74). A true reflection of a complete caring relation is shown by G1 of program A, talking about how she felt about her classroom.

You feel safe in your classroom, you feel like you can just say anything or like walk up and do anything, do whatever you want. But, you're also like want to be there, so like, you want to be at home, you feel safe you can do whatever you want but you still learn things at home and you still learn things in this classroom that you want to learn.

(G1—PA—Int#5, November 2018)

In the statement, there is reciprocity, freedom to be one self, safety, confidence, and interest. Her needs in the classroom environment were being satisfied; she was at home.

On the other hand, if there is incoherency within the interpretation of the gestures, there is no common meaning (Blumer, 1986). Without common meaning communication will be limited or ineffective, which stymies the possibility of a relationship coming to fruition. For example, students who had to be terminated from programs could not be supported because there was incoherency along the lines of meaning for them. When there is no coherency in meaning reciprocity cannot be achieved, and the student might have to be removed if there is no resource to support the student.

Care is situational (Noddings, 2002), interaction is shaped by context (social, cultural, historical), and emerging concepts can evoke a shift that results a change in the situation (Charmaz, 2014). For instance, most of the students responded to the teachers’ gestures and made the choice to be a part of the programs; however, even with a supportive environment, some students had to be removed from the program because they were not doing their share of the work in the relationship. From a symbolic interactionist perspective, subjects are not fixed in their conduct, their conduct varies based on what they need to take into account

(Blumer, 1986). According to Noddings (2002) both parties have responsibilities in the caring relation. As T1 of Program A told his students in their initial interaction “*you have to do your share of the work.*”

The general understanding of reciprocity in care ethics stipulates that the caring roles must be reciprocated between the individuals in the relationship; eventually, the cared-for person advances in their response to the care enough to assume the role of the carer. However, in unequal relationships, such as that of a teacher and a student, the carer retains the role, and the one receiving the care shows their reciprocity, recognizing and responding to the carers’ actions (Noddings, 2012b) as articulated above. Establishing and maintaining a caring relationship with individual students in mainstream classrooms is construed as an overwhelming task especially in situations where teacher: pupil ratios are high. In situations where teacher: pupil ratios are high, I concur that the reality of doing this type of work is challenging and can be a recipe for teacher burnout. From my experience as an educator, I am more than familiar with that type of experience; however, from what I learned in this study, creating a classroom that is caring and supportive can make a great difference in the way students experience school, and how they perceive themselves, peers, and teachers.

Caring and Supportive Classroom

As argued by Noddings (2012b), creating a caring classroom climate underlies everything else that is done by teachers, resulting in improvements in other areas. Even though the teacher participants credited their relationships with students as contributing to their success, in actuality teachers cannot be passionate about every child (Noddings, 1984). Consequentially, students who receive no attention outside of school and come looking for attention are going to pose a challenge for teachers who have large classes and extend themselves to build relationships with the many students in their care. One or two students in your class who are longing for love and support and not receiving it can have negative impact

on the classroom climate resulting in loss of productivity and contact time with the students. Teachers cannot control the conduct and the experiences students bring to their classrooms, but the creation and maintenance of an environment in which they feel cared for and supported can provide some relief, the attention they crave, and eventually respond to caring about those who care for them (Noddings, 1984).

All the graduate participants indicated or implied that they bear feelings towards teachers, classmates, themselves, and their classroom community, and have found that their mainstream experiences were not as well rounded in caring as their alternative education classrooms. An individual's feelings are affiliated with their emotions and "emotions guide our encounter with others and help to establish and maintain social arrangement" (Fields, Copp, & Kleinman, 2006, p. 157). Since an individual's emotion impact social arrangement, the negative feelings students carry along from their past school experiences can influence their conduct and negate the effectiveness of their teachers' efforts to complete a caring relationship. When it becomes a challenge to get the recipient of the care to respond, a community that cares can help to nurture the relationship (Noddings, 2012b). I believe the order of things in the programs was instrumental in the establishment and maintenance of a positive social arrangement in the classroom that helped to nurture the students.

Creating a caring classroom is not exclusively dependent on teachers' desires, it is a joint act between students and teachers. As was noted in the previous section, interaction is critical to the development of meanings between individuals (students and teachers). Interaction is the source of interpretation and action (Charmaz, 2014). As with the individual context, in the group context, symbolic interaction is an unremitting process in which individuals "fit together lines of conduct" by defining and interpreting each others actions (Blumer, 1986, p. 66). Considering that an individual's past interactions can influence how a community functions and how those individuals handle and interpret their circumstances in

the community, the feelings and symbolisms from those interactions are not static.

Individuals are not eternally entrenched in their conduct, historical contexts only aid the formation of conduct but they do not produce outcomes; change can be instigated by a shift in reality (Charmaz, 2014). The teachers' interaction with the students and the established tone of the learning environment in the programs instigated the reality shift for the at-risk students; the reality of their classrooms is unlike what they experienced in their mainstream schools. The shift in reality is not instantaneous, it is shaped through the implicit evolving joint action between the individuals (students and teachers) involved.

In a joint action, individuals can "form, sustain, weaken or transform" that which is symbolic to them, inclusive of meanings they have of themselves (Blumer, 1986, p. 21). To form, sustain, weaken or transform that which is symbolic or have meaning "definition and interpretation" is necessary. "The dual process [interpretation and definition] operates both to sustain established patterns of joint conduct and to open them for transformation." To sustain established patterns is contingent on the same manner of interpretation that enabled and validated the other participants' defining acts which are dependent on reiterative affirmations for continuity (Blumer, 1986, p. 66-67). Charmaz (2014) contends that over time, individuals, accede to "routine meanings and practices" which makes the interpretative process redundant and are likely to remain that way unless the establish patterns become problematic (p. 271).

Established patterns are vulnerable to be weakened or eliminated if the interpretation that maintains the definition is impaired or interrupted by a modified definition. For example, the teachers' demonstration of care was defined in relation to the students' needs, reinforced through multiple interactions and the overall order of things in the programs' learning environment. If the actions that define care change and is no longer meeting expectations, then the interpretation will be impacted, and the established pattern of conduct will be

vulnerable to be weakened. Below I will discuss a few established patterns of conduct that were defined and interpreted positively in the programs.

Humans' inherent need for belonging, power, fun, freedom, and survival can serve as motivation to alter their conduct when these needs are satisfied. Individuals will make the choice to regulate their conduct to satisfy their inherent needs and continue to make that choice with less apprehension if the conditions remain (Glasser, 1986). In accordance with the aforementioned, continuity and affirmation of the defining acts are necessary to maintain established patterns of conduct, which is a precondition for transformation hence, transformation is likely to occur when the conditions remain. The ongoing conditions in the classroom communities have shown elements related to all five of Glasser's inherent needs.

Giving students a fresh start, teaching how to handle failure, removing traditional structures and building community were instances in which students were being prepared for transformation through the formation of new lines of conduct in the classroom community. Giving students a fresh start means refraining from conceptualizing students through the lens of their past, receiving them as individuals and focusing on what they needed and could do in their new setting are steps to release from the burdens and judgements, and allowing them to experience freedom. Teaching students how to handle failure with collaborative challenge task [program A] activities build resilience and confidence that replaced negative self-concepts over time which G1 attested to when her high school teacher told her online learning was not a good way for her to learn. She quickly recollected that she had learned that she can do anything, a symbolism of her redefined self-concept that emerged through the challenge tasks.

Teachers sharing stories about their personal failures alter how students felt about themselves, imparting that failure is not selective, that all humans are susceptible to failure. This sharing of personal experiences cultivates feelings of respect and liberation with

students (Hernandez, 2016). It also, weakens the established power relations between students and teachers. The nature of the student-teacher relationship is a redefinition of how students typically know teachers, that lead to an interpretation of teachers as human who probably have similar emotional experiences as they do. A redefinition how students conceptualize themselves and student-teacher relationships.

The opportunities created for students to share in the classroom power structure, play lead roles managing tasks, regulating their conduct in classroom discussions, deciding how they learn, and show what they learn means more cooperation and less resistance as students become aware of their needs and of what is meaningful to them. Students are more cooperative and less resistant because the atmosphere the teachers created are unlike what existed in their mainstream schools (Smith & Thomson, 2014). Traditionally, teachers use coercion to regulate students' conduct, but "an individual's wishes and whims may not alter reality, new conditions and collective action may" (Charmaz, 2014, p. 266). Coercion has its place, but the teachers' whims should not supersede that which is important to the student, coercion might be necessary in some situations, but it must be used in a caring way, considering and acting in regard to students' needs (Noddings, 2002). Exercising and authority and making decisions about their classroom activity establishes and affirm power and freedom.

Constantly, emphasizing to students that they are a part of a class family, welcoming students to class daily, and phoning them when they do not show up for school—are situations in which teachers are repeatedly defining and affirming acceptance and togetherness to maintain the symbolism of belonging. Experiencing belonging in their school environment, can be an exceptional feeling for at-risk students who may not have any chance of feeling connected elsewhere or with other individuals which is necessary for them to succeed. Disconnection from other individuals and education are among the main reasons

why children fail (Beck & Malley, 1998). Feeling socially connected to individuals in the school environment can form part of the reason students complete and not drop out. Social disconnection is one of the associated characteristics researchers found with youth during their middle years who dropped out of school in the Statistics Canada YITS (2002) survey. According to Beck & Malley (1998), the connectedness that is engendered through student-teacher relationships can form the foundation from which students start to experience a sense of belonging. The HBSC Canada (2014) survey showed decline in students feeling cared for by their teachers as they progress through the upper grade levels (above Grade 6). In fact, altogether, the researchers found fewer positive feedback that demonstrates connectedness to school between Grades 6 to 10. The occurrences of fewer feedback showing connectedness to school in the survey peaked in the middle to secondary grades, which is the grade range that most graduate participants indicate they were struggling in school, socially and academically.

Students interpret school as a place they want to be and show up for school when they experience feelings of connectedness. It is that type of connectedness G1 experienced through the fun she was having in her program:

Even like in the mornings, I remember some mornings when it was like nice out. If I'd missed the bus, I would run downtown and catch the bus. Like run all the way down Eighth Street or chase the bus until they notice me. That's how dedicated I was to school because I loved that program. I'm like I didn't want to miss anything it was fun. It was really fun. (G1—PA—Int#5, November 2018)

This level of dedication to school shows that school symbolised, and was expected to be, a daily dose of fun. Laughing together in activities, feeling comfortable enough to be one's self and joke with each other, taciturn students opening up to share in conversation, engaging in non-academic fun activities with their teachers, cooking together, appreciating

differences through the sharing of cultural experiences are all activities in the programs that maintain and satisfy the students' need for fun. The gratification from having fun is a genetic reward that motivates individuals to keep the momentum going to acquire knowledge (William, 1986). It also supports the building of positive relationships in the classroom, which explains T1's actions of engaging in "*stupid waste of time fun*" with his students before getting into serious academic work with his students in the first semester of school. Activities that offer possibilities for the building of positive relationships with students are an essential part of at-risk students education, and should be factored into their education program at both individual and group level. Positive relations with students not only construct relationships, it also opens avenues for the identification of struggles the student might be grappling with Maillet (2017).

In all three programs, the teachers spoke of instances in which they discovered and assisted students with needs beyond the walls of the classroom. Going above and beyond, helping students to make their lives secure, teachers are meeting the need for survival. This is another way of demonstrating care for students. For example, directing or referring students to places where they can access welfare services such as food or mental health treatment are ways in which teachers are helping students to survive. Giving students time to take a nap when they come to school tired, and adjusting assignments to ensure completion to protect students from failure are instances in which teachers support students survive. Satisfying these needs is the demonstration of care for students' well-being in school, and outside of school. As permanent fixtures in the programs, students are able to interpret the teachers' actions as genuine care and encourage students to do their best. "We [teachers] are far more likely to concentrate on establishing conditions that will call forth the best in students, that will make being good both possible and desirable" (Noddings, 2002, p. 2).

The physical environment of the classrooms has an affect on students' conduct; boosting feelings of belonging. Students sitting on couches, having classes outdoors in Program A; and Program C, operating out of an actual house that has areas for bonding and recreation help to remove feelings of being in the typical structured arrangement of a classroom where students feel excluded and disconnected. The learning environment design and classroom arrangement helps to buttress the setting for social interaction in each program and the development of connectedness between students and their teachers (Phillips, 2014). The horseshoe shaped classroom arrangement in program B, where each student has clear visibility of each other and the low teacher: pupil ratio also endorses interaction between peers and students and teachers.

A fixed classroom, and a low teacher: pupil ratio affords continuity and maximise student-teacher engagement. Classrooms with low student-teacher ratios are more advantageous to both student and teachers (McGee & Lin, 2017). Teachers are able to factor more contact time with students who struggle and give more attention and recognition to students which helps to improve the relationship. Students experience more continuity throughout their day, which (Noddings, 2002) endorses for bonding and the development of trust between students and teachers. At the secondary level this type of structure is not fitting to the educational model denoted by institutional policy, students moving to multiple rooms and contend with multiple teachers. The programs collectively show features of the physical environment for constructivist—spaces for social interaction and knowledge construction, experiential—using indoor and outdoor learning spaces, and humanistic—promoting independence and relationship building—learning theories.

In the same way the affective and the physical environments within the programs demonstrate care and inclusivity, correspondingly, instruction was delivered with the same forethought. The multidimensional approach to instruction aims to inspire all students, and

meet them where their needs are (McGee & Lin, 2017). Diversifying instruction using scaffolding and differentiated instruction demonstrates flexibility. Hernandez (2016) endorses flexibility, adaptability and effort in instruction; instruction that is rigid is not supportive of students' needs. Students at-risk have a variety of needs, and those needs often do not fit in the mould of the mainstream school system. The instructional approach that works for at-risk students in three programs defines care for their personalized needs, empowering students to experience success that might have seem far-fetched for them before their respective programs.

Teachers adjusting academic expectations in their efforts to help students to achieve academic success; making the effort to look beyond the students' shortcomings and adapt the academic plan to ensure they are successful defines inclusivity. Rather than applying pressure to the students in their already difficult situations, the teachers considered the students' reality and created a path for success which shows care. Students continue to show up for school and work towards achieving success because they interpret the teachers' actions as caring and working for them. Shaping their approach to instruction according to the students' needs and skill level, teachers ensure all students are inspired.

Differentiation in instruction departs from the linear approach to instruction. The project-based instructional model in program A, facilitates students active participation working at their skill level. Students active participation in their learning facilitates the development of educational resilience (McGee & Lin, 2017). For the disengaged youth, T5 believes, student need to feel successful and being a student again which means meeting students where they are. A teacher's line of conduct for meeting students where they are is embodied in Maillet's (2017) conceptualization of the instruction of at-risk students "provide active, creative, and service driven instruction that would re-engage students in their own learning" (p. 234). Students helping in the planning and organization of their learning

experiences; engaging in cooperative learning and playing the role of the most knowledgeable other scaffolding; and teachers incorporating aspects of students' culture and career relevant content in the program activities in their endeavour to support students' success academically and outside of school are all examples of "active, creative and service driven" way of instructing.

Contrasts with Mainstream Schools.

Of the three programs studied, the highest teacher: pupil ratio was fourteen to one which is not common in many mainstream classrooms that have twenty to thirty or more students to one teacher. Classes with high teacher: pupil ratios are going to have fewer opportunities for students to develop bonds with their teachers. For high school students who spend short periods with multiple teachers every day, in some instances different classrooms, and have a rigid time schedule, their situation is not conducive to bonding and continuity with their teachers. Noddings (1988) noted that some structures within education systems are impediments to caring. "The current hierarchical structure of management, the rigid mode of allocating time, the kind of relationships encouraged, the size of schools and classes, the goals of instruction, modes of evaluation, patterns of interaction, selection of content" (p. 221) all interfere with the ability of school teachers to develop deep relationships with students, and is perhaps associated with the attrition of students connectedness with school as they move through the upper secondary grades. Numerous researchers have shown that students who feel connected to school are likely to perform better.

In the alternative programs, there is evidence of departure from or modification to the way in which some of the structures named above are handled. For example, the sharing of power in classrooms (except for Program C, a practice deemed unsuitable for the nature of the students), the encouragement of student autonomy, the teachers' flexibility with time allocation and modes of instruction, considering relevance and suitability for students'

capabilities and emotional state, are not universally common practices in mainstream classrooms. The disparities in the structures in the alternative programs compared to mainstream schools is largely attributable to the autonomy the teachers have in governing their programs and the environment.

Implications of the Study

My inquiry into the conditions teachers of alternative education programs for students at-risk identify as necessary, and graduates of the same programs interpret and symbolize as meaningful to their success, shows that a combination of conditions instituted and directed by the teachers contributed to the students' achieving success. The programs' educational designs and the teachers' pedagogical practice are pivotal to the success achieved; facilitating flexibility that is conducive to individual instruction and affective engagement with students which support students' social and emotional needs. The modification and delivery of curricula as well as the physical and social environments demonstrate inclusivity, care and connectedness.

Aron (2006) described alternative education programs as "often characterized by their flexible schedules, smaller teacher-student ratios, and modified curricula" (p.6), which I concur with, but this characterization is incomplete. Raywid (1994) questioned the defining standards of operations of alternative education programs, because the programs are created as necessary and are historically known to have disparities in their structure and operation (How are the students entered in the programs? What are the defined traits of the population? Is the alternative education concept school or education system driven?). The differences with enrolment and population are common with the three programs studied; however, neither data collection or analysis of whether the programs are school or education system driven was done. In my opinion, alternative education programs should be system driven. There will always be students who do not fit in the constructed proverbial mainstream school

mold; there will always be students who learn in unique ways or from a diverse background. Unless accommodations are made for students' individual differences within education systems, there will always be students who are underserved and placed at-risk for dropping-out or experience other forms of school failure. As demonstrated in the analysis, not all students were receptive to the offerings of the programs; some programs may be appealing to some students but not to others. Therefore, variety is necessary to attend to unique needs.

The commonality that establishes sameness among the three programs is the practice of ethics of care which is not emphasized by both scholars as a fundamental characteristic of alternative education programs. Caring did not mean the teachers were lax and smothering; they were authoritative when necessary, but being supportive, welcoming and caring about students' individual needs were priority and were the foundation of everything else. It is a great difference for students when they know their teachers genuinely care about their individual needs and can count on having a caring and safe space to go to, especially when they are living in high risk situations.

Seeing that, students at-risk learn in unique ways, and are historically underserved in education systems (Portelli, Shields, & Vibert, 2007); educational designs that are oriented towards institutional goals (Harpine, 2011) are less concerned about students' individual needs. Essential to the support necessary for students with unique needs to achieve success are the underlying factors that contribute to the students being placed at-risk (Wotherspoon & Schissel, 2001). Teachers making time to have conversations with students about what is happening in their lives is an indication of care for some students. Teachers who are overwhelmed by the many students in their care, the many other administrative tasks they may have to meet the demands of institutional ideals, and have rigid schedules tend to have little time to engage with students individually and in relational activities, especially in the upper grades. The alternative education programs are oriented towards conditions and

practices that are focused on handling students' failings and inadequacies individually that are likely to place them at risk in the society and experience a lesser quality of life. Which mainstream schools are less likely to attend to?

In light of the increasing influence of neoliberalism on educational practice, teachers are often placed in position where they have to be oriented toward academic targets and less on the organization of a caring and relational classroom (te Riele, Mills, McGregor, & Baroutsis, 2017). It is not that teachers do not care about their students or all teachers are uncaring; indeed, only one reference was made by a graduate participant to mainstream teachers being uncaring. The constraints imposed on teachers by the many responsibilities that require their attention limit their capacity to fully care for the students.

The graduate participants were mainly drawn to the affect they experienced in their alternative programs which was demonstrated through relationships, instruction and the environment. To construct a semblance of the graduate participants' feelings about their school experiences, I asked questions such as "How are your alternative education teachers different from your mainstream teachers? How is your mainstream school different from the alternative program?" More often than not, their answers were mainly about the relational affect as stated in these statements: "the classroom was smaller, the teachers are more active and stuff with you" (G4, Program B), "they give you more instruction; they talk about it more" (G5, Program B), "they are very caring and understanding, they are there for you" (G6, Program B), "when we went out we would just have a lot of fun" (G2, Program A), "they treated us like humans like we were smart like we were functioning people" (Program A), "that was just the best. We were going on trips and gaining trust with your peers and just building friendships" (G1, Program A). These responses revealed feelings of recognition, acceptance, connectedness, happiness and satisfaction.

Limitations and Conclusion

If it was possible to recruit graduate participants from all three programs represented in the study who are now adults, it would have provided more data on the interpretation and symbolism of students who participate in alternative education during difficult upper secondary years which seems to be the period when adolescents feel most disconnected from school. It was a challenging task contacting graduates who are now adults, as well as organizing a suitable time to meet with a complete stranger for an interview. I had a number of no-shows for interviews.

I was not able to account for the graduate participants of Program B's experiences after the program because they had just about finished with their programs (but not completed) at the time of the interview. Of concern, is the issue students face after leaving the alternative programs and no longer having the support to spur them on. Two of the three graduate participants of Program A struggled when they returned to the mainstream to complete their secondary education; they struggled because the conditions in the programs were no longer available to them. G1 dropped out for a while, but her resilience (which she attributed to developing during Program A) brought her back and at the time of the interview she was in the process of completing her secondary education at a secondary alternative program. G2 left school and is content about using the skills he learned in the program in his job. He intends to return eventually to earn his secondary diploma. Individuals who experience high risk situations in their lives tend to be vulnerable to like situations in the future. Data derived from investigating the outcomes of former students of alternative education programs could add value to educational policy decisions geared towards the education and training of at-risk adolescents.

The affect the students experience emerged from getting adequate and individual attention from their teachers, the fun and friendly relations with their classmates, being

engaged in their learning, the comfortable setting of their classrooms, the care and interest the teachers showed in the things that have meaning for them or affected them outside of school. Why is it that many mainstream schools do not have the same effect on their students as the alternative programs? From one participant's narrative, teachers with large classes are too constrained by time and workload to develop relations with their students at the secondary level. The demanding schedule of doing five classes in one day is not handled well by all students. As well, the use of test scores as a directive to make decisions, a lack of regard for students' individual needs, inadequate use of instructional styles that engage students, such as differentiating instruction and scaffolding for advancement, all lead to a low level of learning.

Noddings (2012b) recommended continuity with the same teacher for three years to construct caring relationships, but the teachers in these programs did it in a year or less; however, these teachers interacted with their students for the entire school day, not just for one hour per day. Education policy makers should consider implementing education policies, especially at the secondary level that afford students opportunities to: experience more continuity with their teachers and peers to build relationships and develop connectedness with each other; and to get support to a greater degree during the early secondary years than currently if they feel pressured doing the required quota of courses, enabling them to maintain their pace of achievement and complete with their social cohorts. Low teacher: pupil ratios should support more time for relational activities between students and teachers. Additional funding should be made available for teachers and students to engage in activities that build community and strengthen relationships, more so in school divisions that have a high number of students of a low-socioeconomic status.

Teacher training is also a practical and direct medium to impact pedagogical delivery to struggling learners at the secondary level and below. Teachers in training should be instructed on how to relate to, as well as participate in, a short-term practicum in schools that

have disadvantaged students. Teachers in training will get direct experience with students who are most vulnerable to failing in school when the right support is not provided.

For alternative programs, I recommend the development of transition programs for students who return to mainstream schools. These programs should provide support and a liaison between their new mainstream school teachers and their alternative education program teachers. Individuals who experience school failure and never overcome it often have a lower quality of life. Citizens with a lower quality of life will require more long-term funding for social assistance, policing, and health care. For future research, I believe it would be fitting to investigate the impact of neoliberalism on relational classroom practices and the academic achievement of struggling learners.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Teacher Participant Consent Form

Title: Teacher Participant Consent Form

Project Title: Creating Success Stories: Students At-risk Succeeding in Alternative Education Programs

Researcher(s): Karrian Banton-Brown, masters student, Department of Educational Foundations, University of Saskatchewan, 306-966-7582, kdb108@mail.usask.ca

Supervisor: Dr. Janet McVittie, College of Education, janet.mcvitte@usask.ca Phone: 306 966-7582

Purpose of the Research

The intent of this qualitative study is to explore the experiences of teachers in and graduates of alternative education programs and develop a theory from their descriptions that elucidates the contributing factors supporting the success of students in alternative education programs.

The topics to be explored are:

- The factors that teachers of alternative education programs deemed necessary for students at-risk to achieve success in alternative education programs
- The perspectives held by graduates of alternative education programs about skills they learned in the programs
- How the skills learned by graduates in alternative education programs benefit them after leaving the programs
- The factors that graduates of alternative education programs identify as supporting of their successes

Procedures

First, a non-participative observation will be conducted in your class for three days. The observation is expected to last 1 to 2 hours over the three days. Then, you will be invited to participate in a face-to-face interview, prior to which, you will be given an overview of the study and provide your consent. During the interview, you will be asked open-ended questions and, as necessary, follow up questions. The interview will be recorded, transcribed, and stored electronically. At any point in the interview, you may request that the audio recorder be turned off. Follow-up interviews might be requested if the need arises after review of your interview transcript. Finally, you will review the transcripts and the summary of the analysis to confirm that your views are accurately represented. Please feel free to ask any questions regarding the procedures and goals of the study or your role as a participant.

Funded by

This research does not require nor will be using funding from any source.

Potential Risks

There are no foreseeable potential risks associated with participating in this research.

Potential Benefits

- To provide pedagogical insights to teachers and other personnel in the education system that support the success of students who may become at-risk.
- To provide evidence-based data to inform intervention development for disenfranchised youths.
- To develop understanding of pedagogical practices that support the success of students at-risk in traditional schools, to reduce the number of students who become at-risk or disenfranchised from the education system.

Compensation

No Compensation will be given for participation in this study.

Confidentiality

Your personal information will be kept anonymous for the collection of data as well as the presentation of research findings. Your personal information will not be released to any source.

Storage of Data

The data collected will be secured in password protected computer files at the University of Saskatchewan for a period of up to five years under the authority of Dr. Janet McVittie. After five years, electronic files will be deleted.

Right to Withdraw

Your participation is voluntary, and you can answer only those questions that you are comfortable with. You may withdraw (and withdraw your data) from the research project for any reason, without explanation. However, your right to withdraw from this study will not apply after the analysis begins.

Follow up

To obtain results from the study, please contact the research supervisor using the contact information.

Questions

This research project has been approved on ethical grounds by the University of Saskatchewan Behavioural Research Ethics Board on June 4, 2018 (BEH#18-82). Any questions regarding your rights as a participant may be addressed to that committee through the Research Ethics Office ethics.office@usask.ca (306) 966-2975.

Consent

I have read and understand the description provided and had an opportunity to ask questions which have been answered satisfactorily. I consent to participate in the research project and a copy of this consent form has been given to me for my records.

Name of Participant

Signature

Date

Researcher's Signature

Date

Appendix B: Graduate Participant Consent Form

Title: Graduate Participant Consent Form

Project Title: Creating Success Stories: Students At-risk Succeeding in Alternative Education Programs

Researcher(s): Karrian Banton-Brown, Masters student, Department of Educational Foundations, University of Saskatchewan, 306-966-7582, kdb108@mail.usask.ca

Supervisor: Dr. Janet McVittie, College of Education, 306-966-7582, janet.mcvittie@usask.ca

Purpose of the Research

The intent of this qualitative study is to explore the experiences of teachers and graduates of alternative education programs, and develop a theory from their descriptions that elucidates the contributing factors supporting the success of students in alternative education programs.

The topics to be explored are:

- The factors that teachers of alternative education programs deemed necessary for students at-risk to achieve success in alternative education programs
- The perspectives held by graduates of alternative education programs about skills they learned in the programs
- How the skills learned by graduates in alternative education programs benefit them after leaving the programs
- The factors that graduates of alternative education programs identify as supporting of their successes

Procedures

You will be asked to participate in a face-to-face interview, prior to which, you will be given an overview of the study and provide your consent. You will be asked open-ended questions and necessary probing questions. The interview is expected to take 45 to 60 minutes. The interview will be recorded and stored electronically. At any point in the interview, you may request that the audio recorder be turned off. Follow-up interviews might be requested if the need arises after review of your interview transcript. An opportunity will also be provided for you to review the transcripts to confirm that your views are accurately represented. You may withdraw your interview transcripts at any point until analysis begins. Please feel free to ask any questions regarding the procedures and goals of the study or your role as a participant.

Funded by

This research does not require or will be using funding from any source.

Potential Risks

There are no foreseeable potential risks associated with participating in this research.

Potential Benefits

- To provide pedagogical insights to teachers and other personnel in the education system that support the success of students who may become at-risk.
- To provide evidence-based data that inform intervention development for disenfranchised youths.
- The use of pedagogical practices that supports the success of students at-risk in traditional schools could reduce the number of students who become at-risk or disenfranchised from the education system or experience academic failure.

Compensation

No Compensation will be given for participation in this study.

Confidentiality

Your personal information will be kept anonymous for the collection of data as well as the presentation of research findings. Nor will your information be released to any source.

Storage of Data

The data collected will be secured in password protected computer files at the University of Saskatchewan for a period of up to five years under the authority of Dr. Janet McVittie. After five years, electronic file deletion, such that it cannot be recovered, will be done.

Right to Withdraw

Your participation is voluntary, and you can answer only those questions that you are comfortable with. You may withdraw from the research project for any reason, without explanation. However, your right to withdraw from this study will not apply after the analysis begins.

Follow up

To obtain results from the study, please contact the research supervisor using the contact information.

Questions

This research project has been approved on ethical grounds by the University of Saskatchewan Behavioural Research Ethics Board on June 4, 2018 (BEH#18-82). Any

questions regarding your rights as a participant may be addressed to that committee through the Research Ethics Office ethics.office@usask.ca (306) 966-2975.

Consent

I have read and understand the description provided and had an opportunity to ask questions which have been answered satisfactorily. I consent to participate in the research project and a copy of this consent form has been given to me for my records.

Name of Participant

Participant's Signature

date

Researcher's Signature

Date

Appendix C: Invitation Letter for Teachers

Title: Invitation Letter for Teachers

Dear _____,

I am a student researcher at the University of Saskatchewan in the department of Educational Foundations, and I am currently recruiting participants for the research project titled:

“Creating Success Stories: Students at Risk in Alternative Education Programmes.” The purpose of this study is to investigate the qualities of alternative education programs that help students to successfully complete school.

As a participant in the study your contribution may potentially provide insight that can improve educational delivery and increase the success rate of students who are at-risk for school failure in the regular school system, as well as students in alternative education programmes. If you agree to participate in the study, I would like to observe you in your class for about an hour and then have a follow up conversation with you. The purpose of the observation is to support my understanding of your context, which will support our conversation about your practices.

The actual research is our conversation about the qualities of your alternative education program and your pedagogical practices that you believe contributed to the success of your students. An audio recorder will be used to record the conversation and is estimated to take about 45-60 minutes. If necessary, follow-up meetings may be requested to address questions that may arise. You will have the authority to request for the audio-recorder to be turned off at any time during the conversation. After the conversation is transcribed, you will have an opportunity to review the transcript prior to analysis to ensure that your views are accurately represented.

This Study has been approved by the GSCS; however, your participation is voluntary. You will be given an anonymous identity, and your personal information will be kept confidential.

Please indicate your decision to participate or send questions you may have about the study:
kdb108@mail.usask.ca. If you decide to participate, I will arrange to meet with you at a time
and date convenient to you at the program location.

Sincerely,

Karrian Banton-Brown

Appendix D: Letter to Teachers for the Recruitment of Participants

Title: Letter to Teachers for the Recruitment of Participants

Re: Research Project—Creating Success Stories: Students At-Risk Succeeding in Alternative Education Programs

Dear _____

As a teacher-participant in the above-named project, I am writing to let you know about an opportunity for graduates (who are now adults) of your program to participate in the study. I would love to have three to four graduates of your program to participate in face-to-face interviews that will aim to identify the qualities of your program that they believe are factors that supported their success in the program. I am therefore, seeking your assistance to contact these graduates of your program to participate in the study. Please see the contact script below that you might use when contacting these individuals.

A graduate student from the department of Educational Foundations at the University of Saskatchewan is seeking graduates of the (name of program) to participate in a study to identify the qualities of the program that help students to successfully complete their Grade Twelve program.

If you have an interest to participate in this study, as a participant you will be asked to attend a face-to-face interview about the qualities of the (name of program) that you believe contributed to your success to complete high school. The interview is estimated to take 45-60 minutes. A follow-up interview(s) may be required to address questions that may arise from your first interview. Your personal information will be kept confidential and your identity will remain anonymous. Do you have an interest to participate in the project? Will you permit me to give your contact information to the investigators Dr. Janet McVittie and Karrian Banton-Brown who are working on the project?

Make a list of the graduates who agree to participate and their contact information and email it to Dr. Janet McVittie: janet.mcvittie@usask.ca

Thanks in advance for your cooperation.

Dr. Janet McVittie

Research Supervisor

Karrian Banton-Brown

Student Researcher

Appendix E: Investigator's Invitation Script for Graduates of Alternative Education Program.

Title: Investigator's Invitation Script for Graduates of Alternative Education Program

Hi I am Karrian Banton-Brown, student researcher at the University of Saskatchewan in the department of Educational Foundations. I am contacting you because you have previously agreed through your former teacher of the (name of program), to be contacted for participation in the research project that is investigating the qualities of alternative education programs that help students to successfully complete high school.

Your contribution to this study may provide information that will potentially help students who are at-risk for school failure or in programs such as (name of program) by improving educational delivery, which could potentially increase students' success rate.

As a participant in this study, you will be invited to attend a face-to-face interview about the qualities of the (name of program) that you believe contributed to your success in the program. The interview is estimated to take 45-60 minutes. If you agree to participate in this interview, a follow-up interview (s) may be requested to address questions that may arise from your first interview. I would like to audio-record the interview; however, you may turn off the audio-recorder at any time during the interview. Once the interview(s) is transcribed, you and I will go over it together, and you may change anything on the transcript that you wish. You will have full control over what is reported from your interview. Your personal information will be kept confidential and you will be given an anonymous identity. You may withdraw your interview at any time until analysis begins. Would you like to become a participant in the study? Thanks for taking the time to speak with me. If you have additional questions, I can be reached at 306-966-7582 or email: kdb108@usask.ca.

Appendix F: Transcript Release Form

Title: Creating Success Stories: Students Succeeding in Alternative Education Programs

Transcript Release Form

I, _____, have reviewed the complete transcript of my personal interview in this study, and have been provided with the opportunity to add, alter, and delete information from the transcript as appropriate. I acknowledge that the transcript accurately reflects what I said in my personal interview with Karrian Banton-Brown. I hereby authorize the release of this transcript to Karrian Banton-Brown to be used in the manner described in the Consent Form. I have received a copy of this Data/Transcript Release Form for my own records.

Name of Participant

Date

Signature of Participant

Signature of Researcher

Appendix G: Sample of Field Notes after Interview

October 2, 2018

Interview with T1

One of the things that stood out to me in this interview was T1 relating to being among the students that usually got picked last when his classmates were making teams in gym class. To make matters worse, in one class he was paired to wrestle with another student who was much bigger than he was and thrown in the air across the room. As a result of these experiences and the way things were handled in the class, he hated gym class and started skipping, and spent that time period in the computer lab. He was not given choice in the situation, and seemingly, felt powerless in his class. In terms of picking teams, he said he will never allow that to happen to any of his students. Teams should be selected in an honouring way.

Hearing this story, left me with two questions, 1) How does power and choice help to influence students' class participation? 2) How does teachers' prior experiences influence how they respond to their students?

Appendix H: Sample of Memos During Transcriptions

February 7, 2019

Reflecting on all the interviews, the need for relationship seems to be a constant in the data. Relationships must be first, relationships establishing connectedness between students and teachers. T3 said she had to become a teacher that made sense and worked for the students. How does the teachers work, and the conditions they created in the programs make sense for the students?

February 27, 2019

Three programs observed, but no two are the same. They all have different features that work for the students. Program C offers a setting that is more home-like than it is school like. Program B has a significantly smaller class size, but the teacher and his assistant constantly show the students care and ensure they felt dignified. Program A is oriented towards engagement and teaching the students skills.

Appendix I: Sample of Memos During Coding

August 2019

Coding relationships

I was coding for events that show “relationships must be first” and comparing the events in the data that supported building relationships. I proceeded to examine the data with these questions? How did the students recognize that the teachers meant them well? How did the teachers know what was best for the students? While doing that I came across T1’s statement “We are going to act in a caring relationship.” Being that caring was also mentioned a number of times in the data by both student and teacher participant, I came to the realization that it was not just a relationship, it was a caring relationship. From then on, I started analysing how the ethics of care is represented in the data.